

High-tech workouts

By Christian Toto

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Trainer Rob Stuart (right) of the Sports Club/LA fits Dale Jones with a heart monitor that will go under his shirt.

Keeping those New Year's resolutions can take a high-tech turn, thanks to the latest and greatest fitness goodies on the market. Even Apple has gotten into the act, offering a new device that lets one's shoes and iPod Nano "talk" to each other.

No device can guarantee a flatter stomach or a smaller waistline, however. What they can do is make tracking weight and fitness gains easier and, for some tech junkies, make working out a little more enjoyable.

Doug Murphy, who runs Fitness Training Consulting in the District, says new devices aimed at the workout crowd are hitting the market constantly.

"Some are very useful, others are not quite so useful," Mr. Murphy says. "Time will tell, like everything else with technology."

Ask a personal trainer what gizmo to get for the new year, and the answer is simple: a heart-rate monitor. These devices aren't cutting-edge, but they come with a variety of new features and offer helpful information.

The monitors measure heart rates in real time and generally include a chest-strap transmitter and a wrist receiver where the rate can be displayed.

"They can go to the gym and take the guesswork out of it," Mr. Murphy says. "They don't have to worry if they're going at a high enough speed."

Most people do cardio work, but many fail to track their heart rate. To get the best benefit from all that sweat, it's best to stay within your target heart range, Mr. Murphy says.

Monitors range in price and features, and it's a personal choice as to which model works for each person. Some sound alarms when a heart rate exceeds a set level, while others keep a record of the past 30 or so workouts, which can be downloaded to a computer.

Even body calipers, which measure body fat, have had an electronic makeover. Exercisers can use a hand-held device that uses sensors to gauge body-fat levels, Mr. Murphy says.

The devices can offer an accurate body-fat assessment and are easier to use than the traditional method.

"It's much faster and, when used correctly, it's a great aid," Mr. Murphy says.

Gadgets can offer a number of useful tools, but the bottom line is establishing health benchmarks, he says. Mr. Murphy gives his clients a fitness test every six to eight weeks to help track their progress.

Sometimes progress is being made but can't be detected easily in the mirror or via the scale.

"It's hard to notice some changes, but a body-fat monitor can tell you if your body fat is going down," Mr. Murphy says. "Anything you can do to make getting in shape easier and easier to track can be great motivation, too."

Cedric Bryant, chief science officer with the California-based American Council on Exercise, says high-tech gear that spits out figures on calories burned and other data are great — for the right person.

"Those individuals who are into the numbers game really benefit from that kind of feedback," he says.

Generally speaking, Mr. Bryant says he isn't sure the latest gadgets make a big difference in losing weight and keep fit.

"For most individuals, it's more of the 'less precise' means of feedback that keep them in the game," Mr. Bryant says. "Feeling more energetic, fitting into their clothes better serve as more powerful motivators."

Couch potatoes might benefit the most from even the simplest equipment, such as devices that measure the number of steps one takes.

"Study after study shows those unaccustomed to exercise who start to use their pedometers say it's a tangible, powerful motivator," Mr. Bryant says.

Those who like the high-tech approach should proceed with caution, he says. Downloading workout data to one's iPod or using online fitness tips can be a great way to boost a program, but the material should be as individualized as possible.

It's best to check the credentials of any online fitness guru, making sure he or she has the right background to give sound advice, he says.

"Also, make sure they're doing some type of basic pre-screening assessment, that they're trying to understand a little about you," Mr. Bryant says.

People don't have to break the bank to improve their workouts, says Rob Stuart, a trainer at the Sports Club/LA in the District.

"An entry-level product does enough for the average consumer. Unless you're an athlete, you're not going to use all the gizmos and options offered [on more expensive equipment]," Mr. Stuart says.

Those who don't mind spending a little money on their workout devices can look to Nike and iPod for help. The companies teamed up to let people use sensors in their sneakers to track the distances they run, measure their fastest mile and other options, Mr. Stuart says.

Some of his clients have gone high-tech and enjoy the results. They enter their workouts into online sites to track their efforts, use their iPods for more than music and record their eating habits in Web-based journals.

Just make sure to run any new tech gear past a fitness expert, Mr. Stuart cautions.

Sometimes the old-fashioned methods remain the best.

District-based personal trainer **Jim Coughlin**, author of *"The In-Home Personal Trainer,"* prefers for people who lift weights to record their progress manually.

"Going to a computer to record it doesn't make much sense," says **Mr. Coughlin**, who owns *Coughlin Fitness and Results*.

Fancy gadgetry can help people stay fit, but it shouldn't push aside the basic premise behind exercise. It's a lesson no fancy device can replicate.

"Resistance is resistance. You can get a phenomenal workout if you can push your body as hard as possible," he says. "Don't rely on gadgets all the time."