

focus on fitness



Post-Bariatric Surgery Fitness

BY JENNIFER SISK

Approximately one year ago, a friend of mine had gastric bypass surgery at a university medical center. She was required to participate in one session of counseling and support before and after surgery. While she received extensive counseling and information on nutrition and eating after gastric bypass, support related to establishing an exercise routine following surgery consisted of one statement: "Approximately six weeks after your surgery, you should begin a regular daily exercise program."

After investigating several bariatric surgery programs at various facilities, I found that, unfortunately, while many patients are told that exercise is necessary and beneficial, very few are given instruction on how to start and maintain a safe exercise program. In addition, obese individuals often have physical and psy-

chological barriers to exercise—self-consciousness, joint pain and range of motion limitations, inability to fit into standard exercise machines, and comorbid health conditions. Exercise modifications and specially designed exercise equipment can help obese individuals maintain a regular exercise program both before and after bariatric surgery. Guidance and supervision from trained fitness professionals, as well as ongoing postsurgery peer support, can improve adherence to exercise.

While the bariatric surgical procedure will result in substantial weight loss in the first year after surgery, poor eating and exercise habits often cause weight regain in the long term. Centers offering bariatric surgical services must provide comprehensive support services that include exercise programming, not just nutritional counseling, to help bariatric surgery patients succeed with long-term weight loss and maintenance. And fitness professionals and fitness facilities must increase awareness of the special exercise needs of obese individuals.

The Nutrition Clinic at Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center (La Crosse, Wisc.) recently launched an innovative series of exercise videos for pre- and post-bariatric surgery patients. The most recent video is also appropriate for individuals with exercise limitations due to other conditions. The exercise videos were produced as part of Gundersen Lutheran's Winning Weighs program, an eight-week nutrition and lifestyle management program delivered by RDs, certified fitness specialists, and a professional chef.

"The overall goal of Winning Weighs is to teach participants how to choose healthy foods, increase daily physical activity, and improve health," says Jennifer Larson, RD, CD, administrative director of the Nutrition Clinic. "We found that many participants were looking for indoor activity options, so we developed the series of videos targeted to a variety of fitness levels."

Fitness instructor Ruth Lahmayer, MS, RD, produced the videos. "For the bariatric-focused video, we worked closely with two physical therapists to develop appropriate movements for people who have avoided activity. Our focus starts them out slowly with steady progression," Lahmayer explains.

I had the opportunity to review the first in the Winning Weighs series of three videos. Called *Getting in the Groove—Entry Level Fitness*, the 30-minute video includes both seated and standing exercises led by two staff members with three Winning Weighs post-bariatric surgery patients, each with a different level of fitness.

According to Shanu Kothari, MD, director of minimally invasive bariatric surgery at Gundersen Lutheran, the response to the video has been excellent. "We recommend it for our pre[surgery] and postsurgery patients—it's a way for them to get moving and become more conditioned in the privacy of their own home."

While some fitness professionals will criticize this video for its lack of a "glitzy" set, lack of creative choreography, and instruction by fitness instructors in baggy clothing, I believe those very features will make it appealing to the individuals who need it most. Obese individuals and others with fitness limitations are intimidated by the skintight clothing and physical "perfection" of instructors in mainstream fitness videos and the often dance-club-like setting.

Creative choreography often means difficult-to-follow movement combinations, which discourage beginning exercisers and participants with limitations. The Winning Weighs video provides basic exercise instruction with modifications appropriate for its target population. Simple seated exercises are followed by a low-impact, low-to-moderate intensity aerobic workout that equals walking 1 mile in roughly 20 minutes. The movements are easily followed, even for exercisers who consider themselves uncoordinated. One participant and one instructor use Exer-Poles (which resemble ski poles) for support throughout the workout, demonstrating how the exercises can be modified to reduce impact on the joints.

The "Winning Walk" part of the workout is followed by some simple isometric muscle-toning exercises and stretches. This video also includes valuable encouragement for obese exercisers—each participant gives some brief motivational comments about how the Winning Weighs program has helped them lose and maintain weight. The Winning Weighs series also includes *Winning Walks*, a 45-minute walking-based workout, and *Get on the Bandwagon—Strength and Resistance Challenge*, a basic strength-training workout using resistance bands.

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Even after 15 years of teaching exercisers at all levels, including seniors and beginning exercisers, I was astonished to see just how much obesity can limit movement. Winning Weighs made me realize that health clubs, YMCAs, community centers, and other "mainstream" exercise programs, while offering beginning and basic workouts, are really only serving overweight exercisers without major movement limitations. Given the increasing obese population, more facilities and fitness professionals need to start offering programs like Winning Weighs that are designed to adapt exercise to fit the individual.

For more information about the Winning Weighs workouts, visit www.gundluth.org/nutrition.

For information about Exer-Poles, visit www.walkingpoles.com/?gk=trekking+pole.



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