

Weight reduction centers

Seems everyone's interested in losing weight these days and there are many diet programs to choose from—each claiming to have the perfect plan for slimming you down. Check weight reduction centers carefully before you sign a contract or pay any money down, or you may lose money instead of pounds.

Weight reduction centers that collect up-front fees and then go out of business have been a big problem in Wisconsin. Hundreds of consumers have filed complaints about weight reduction centers. Many of these complaints involve people who paid up to \$2,000 each in advance membership fees, only to have the centers go out of business.

Weight reduction centers are regulated by state law. The law helps protect consumers and provides a way to obtain refunds for undelivered services. Under the law:

- Weight reduction centers must disclose the identity and

location of facilities available to customers, as well as the general nature of the services to be provided.

- Weight reduction centers must specify the length of time covered by the member's contract, not to exceed two years. If the contract includes a weight maintenance program, the contract can be for a specified length not to exceed three years.
- The full price of the membership must be disclosed, including any interest or other charges.
- New members must be informed of their three-day right to cancel.

To further protect consumers, weight reduction centers that require members to pay more than \$100 in advance fees are required to establish proof of financial responsibility with the state.

Choosing a weight reduction center

If you're interested in services provided by a weight reduction center, shop around and compare several programs. Consider the following before making a choice:

- Exactly what services are included in the membership fees. Most centers have several types of membership plans.
- Is the center's location convenient? Do you find the atmosphere comfortable?
- What is the success rate? Don't be swayed by celebrity endorsements or a few dramatic testimonials.
- What are the health risks? What kind of professional supervision is provided during the program?
- What are the fees? Find out the full costs and obligations of the membership, including extra charges for special foods or dietary supplements.

Is a maintenance program part of the package or does it cost extra? Can you afford the program?

- Is the center well managed? Ask current and past members their opinions of the staff and the program.
- Is the center in good financial condition? How long has it been operating?
- Will you get a refund if you move away from the area or drop out of the program?

Don't feel pressured by persuasive sales techniques from center personnel who receive commissions for the memberships they sell. Sales

presentations may include emotional appeals and even scare tactics. Take the time to thoroughly review the center and understand any contract you're asked to sign.

Remember, the key ingredient to any weight reduction program is your own willpower. Research has shown that while some dieters succeed in taking off weight, as many as 95 percent fail to keep all of it off in the long run. To lose weight safely and permanently requires long-term changes in daily eating and exercise habits. Always consult with a physician, dietitian, or other qualified health professional regarding your personal circumstances before starting any new weight reduction program.

For more information, or to file a complaint, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

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