

Elliptical Trainer Buying Guide

by Smooth Fitness © 2009

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Not sure how to choose an elliptical trainer? This elliptical trainer buying guide comes to you from an industry leader, Smooth Fitness. It will tell you what you need to know and what you need to look for when shopping for an elliptical machine.

Next to the treadmill, elliptical trainers follow close behind in popularity among fitness equipment. As a matter-of-fact, sales of elliptical trainers are growing faster today than are the sales of treadmills. Why?

Because elliptical machines are very low-impact, non-jarring, and quite efficient; they have become preferred by many individuals.

What IS an elliptical trainer? *An elliptical trainer is a low-impact exercise machine that simulates walking or jogging. It gets its name from the elliptical motion that the pedals follow when in use.*

The majority of today's elliptical trainers have moving handle bars that allow the user to work the upper body and the lower body simultaneously. For this reason, they are often referred to as "cross-trainers." They are designed to provide very efficient cardiovascular exercise while practically eliminating pressure to the joints and back.

Here are some DOs and DON'Ts to consider before buying an elliptical trainer:

- **DO** shop around and research info and reviews on various models. A few online resources include www.consumersearch.com, www.about.com (owned by the New York Times), and www.allelpticals.com.
- **DON'T** buy an elliptical trainer based upon only one person's opinion – even ours.
- **DO** compare the quality and warranties of several elliptical trainers within your price range. Then, base your choice upon YOUR personal likes and needs and buy an elliptical that fits YOU.

Where to Start?

Price: Not all elliptical trainers are created equally. The design, mechanics, and quality of elliptical machines will vary from one fitness equipment company to another and from one model to another. How much should you expect to spend on an elliptical trainer?

For a decent, dependable elliptical trainer, expect to spend at least \$1,000. The quality of elliptical machines that cost less is questionable. Cheaper models are often noisy and wobbly. After all, the less expensive the elliptical trainer, the cheaper the components used to put it together. Chances are great that these lower-end models will require constant maintenance, and their life spans will be rather short.

Moderate exercisers *might* be able to get by with a decent low-end model. More intense athletes, on the other hand, really need a heavier, more durable machine. Keep in mind that the more you can spend on an elliptical trainer, the higher the quality you will get. Generally, you're better off spending a little more money to get a better quality machine.

User Weight: Before you purchase an elliptical trainer, be sure to consider all of those in your household who will be using the machine. What is the weight of each user? What are the fitness goals of everyone who plans to exercise on the elliptical trainer?

The maximum user weight capacity set by the manufacturers of elliptical trainers is intended as a guideline to help you determine which models will provide safe and trouble-free workouts for all users in your home.

Front-Drive VS Rear-Drive Elliptical Trainers: Some elliptical trainers have rear-drive flywheels. Others have front-drive flywheels. Which style is best?

To answer this question, I sought the expertise of someone who has been in the fitness equipment industry for about 15 years.

“The rear-drive elliptical trainers have a more intuitive design,” explained the fitness equipment expert. “When you exercise, inherent in this design is the proper biomechanical motion. It’s a more natural motion. Most commercial units are the rear-drive type, because it has a floating system with free-rolling bearings. This means there are less mechanics, and less mechanics means less wear and tear. Also, mechanics in the back allow the user to sit forward, maintain the proper posture and, thus, get a better workout.”

Our expert went on to describe front-drive ellipticals: “With front-drive elliptical trainers, they have to add extra linkage to make the pedals more comfortable. They also have to use a track, which can break down due to dirt build-up. There are more mechanical components, which need constant maintenance. More mechanics lead to more wear and tear and more noise. These machines tend to lose their smooth feel. The mechanics pushes the user back, making it necessary to lean forward, so the workout is not as effective as you get on a rear-drive model.”

Components:

Ball Bearings VS Bushings: When choosing an elliptical trainer, you’d do well to go with one that has ball bearings at the pivot points rather than one that has bushings. *Elliptical trainers which have bearings at the pivot points instead of bushings will be more reliable and durable.* Bushings will squeak and break down over time.

It is also good to know the difference between standard bearings and sealed bearings. **Standard bearings** are open and are susceptible to dirt. They need to be greased frequently.

Sealed ball bearings are protected from air and dirt and require no lubrication. *Sealed, self-aligning bearings are preferable.* (Self-aligning bearings adjust the alignment with the motion of the machine and provide a smoother ride.)

According to a knowledgeable source, “*Sealed, self-aligning bearings require no maintenance and extend the durability of the machine longer. This is important, because taking care of your elliptical trainer should not be harder than your exercise.*”

Brake Resistance Systems: Another thing to consider when shopping for an elliptical trainer is the type of brake resistance on the machine. Does it have an electromagnetic resistance brake, a magnetic resistance brake, or a self-generating induction brake?

Electromagnetic brake resistance is best because it is electronic and has no moving parts to break down, thus reducing the possibility of service issues. This type of resistance is typically found in higher end units.

"I haven't seen one fail in 15 years," stated our fitness equipment expert.

Lower end models have **magnetic brake resistance**. Although this type of resistance is not as reliable as electromagnetic resistance, it has proven itself as a lower cost alternative for residential settings.

A few commercial-quality models have a **self-generating induction brake**. Such machines have no motors and require no electrical power, thereby reducing the risk of maintenance issues.

Foot Pedals: What type of foot pedal is most desirable on an elliptical trainer? The choice you make can be a huge factor in determining your comfort level and the efficiency of your workouts.

Articulating pedals are by far more comfortable than non-articulating pedals, because the feet are able to remain flat. As a result, pressure is taken off the ball of the foot and distributed throughout the entire foot. With non-articulating pedals, the ball of the foot absorbs most of the pressure, which often results in numbness.

Smooth Fitness has patented articulating pedals that allow more range of motion without creating any impact. They move with the natural motion of the user's body, sort of like they have been customized for each user. They also work in forward and reverse motions.

Padding on foot pedals, such as the orthopedic pads used on Smooth Fitness elliptical trainers, provide added cushioning to the pedals for more comfortable workouts.

Frame: Small elliptical trainers are rather popular for several reasons. First, they take up less space than bigger models, so they are more practical for people who live in small houses or apartments. Secondly, they weigh less and are easier to move around than the larger, heavier elliptical trainers. Some smaller models even have wheels to make transport from one place to another easier. The cost factor is another reason why small elliptical machines are popular. The smaller machinery typically cost less than the bigger ones.

On the down side, elliptical trainers with smaller and lighter frames are apt to have more issues than the larger, more expensive ones. They are not designed for high intensity exercise, and they definitely will not be as stable as heavier ellipticals (*This means that the maximum user weight capacity will be less*). The stride on a smaller unit will be shorter and inadequate for tall individuals.

Larger, heavier frames are made of higher quality materials, such as strong steel rather than aluminum. They will be sturdier, more durable, and better able to support taller and heavier users than the smaller, lighter elliptical trainers. However, they DO take up more space, and they ARE heavier to move. Once you get one of these elliptical trainers set up, you probably are not going to want to move it.

(If you order a heavy elliptical trainer from an online store, pay a little extra for indoor delivery and setup, if regular shipping covers only curbside drop-off. You'll be glad did!)

Optional Features or Upgrades to Consider:

When you choose an elliptical trainer, you want to make sure that it has the features you desire and need to reach your fitness goals. Below is a list of features that you might want to consider when choosing an elliptical machine:

- **Built-in Workout Programs:** Ideally, you'll want an elliptical that has at least a weight loss program and an interval training program. These programs are used in health clubs by personal trainers and have seen proven results. Almost all models of the Smooth Fitness elliptical trainers have 9 built-in programs that will keep you motivated as well as challenge your body to become stronger and fitter.
- **Built-in Heart Rate Monitor:** Heart rate monitors are standard on most elliptical trainers...even the low-end models. There are a couple of types of heart rate monitors. A wireless chest belt monitor gives the most accurate heart rate reading. The alternative is a contact heart rate monitor (which comes on most lower-end ellipticals). This type of heart rate monitor is not quite as accurate as the chest belt monitor. If you squeeze too hard or let go too soon, for instance, this can interfere with the reading. The best contact heart rate monitor is one that has sensor grips on the moving handle bars. The stationary grips take part of the workout away. Your heart rate reading will be more accurate if taken while working the upper body and not having to stop in the middle of the upper body exercise to check your heart rate.
- **Heart Rate Control:** Having a built-in heart rate control on an elliptical trainer is like having a personal trainer to monitor your pace and keep you working in a desired training zone, such as fat burning. After you choose a training zone, the heart rate control will automatically adjust the resistance to keep you working in that particular zone.
- **Backlit LCD or LED Display:** The display on the console of an elliptical trainer lets you program your workouts and keep track of your progress during each exercise session. Backlit LCD displays are more attractive and easier to read than LCD displays that are not backlit. Nowadays, backlit LCD displays are often equal in quality to LED displays. If you are of average height, LCD displays will seem clear to you. If, however, you are taller or shorter than average, an LED display may be a better choice. LED displays are easier to read at any angle.
- **Adjustable Resistance:** Most elliptical trainers built in the U.S. measure resistance in levels. Other elliptical trainers measure resistance in wattage. Wattage gives the actual value for resistance and is, therefore, more accurate than resistance levels. Nevertheless, even when resistance is measured in levels, being able to adjust the resistance level allows you to control the intensity of your workouts. The more intensity levels found on an elliptical unit, the more adjustability the user has.
- **Stride Length:** Low end elliptical trainers are smaller and have shorter stride lengths (around 16"). If you are short, the shorter stride lengths will probably feel comfortable to you. After all, you don't want to over-stretch and risk pulling a muscle. A stride length of 18" to 21" is generally perfect for someone of average stature or above. There are elliptical trainers with a 26" stride for extra tall users.
- **Extended Warranties:** Most extended warranties are a waste of money. Be sure to read the small print before you purchase an extended warranty. In most cases, you're better off buying a quality elliptical trainer that is already backed by a long warranty.

Incline Ramps, Variable Strides, and Dynamic Motion Trainers: Elliptical trainers that have incline ramps, variable strides, or dynamic motion capabilities are other great options to consider. Any of these options are guaranteed to provide more variety and challenge in your daily workouts.

Incline Ramps: *An adjustable incline ramp* lets you change the angle at which you exercise, so as to work muscle groups in different ways. By increasing the incline, you can work at a more challenging, higher intensity level. On the downside ramps often incorporate a roller system which requires maintenance and may lose its smooth feel over time.

Variable Strides: *An elliptical trainer with a variable stride feature* is a great option for households that have multiple users. Each user can adjust the stride to accommodate his or her height. The stride can also be changed in order to focus on a certain part of the lower body. At a shorter stride, your thighs and calves will be targeted more. At a longer stride, you can better target your glutes and hamstrings.

Dynamic Motion: Smooth Fitness has come up with what are called *dynamic motion trainers*. The Smooth Agile DMT X1 is one such machine. This innovative design provides additional adjustable patterns of motion instead of changing or limiting movement with increased tension. (There are 12 levels of motion on the Agile DMT X1.) The levels of dynamic motion incorporate additional muscle groups for an efficient total body workout. Rather than working merely in one single elliptical motion, dynamic motion trainers allow you to constantly change the pattern of the existing motion to more effectively tone and strengthen both the lower body and the upper body. The biomechanics of a DMT ensure a natural elliptical walking movement, reducing stress on bones and joints.

Tips on Maintaining Your Elliptical Trainer:

To get the most out of your elliptical trainer, you need to follow certain maintenance steps. Proper care of your unit can keep it running smoother and longer.

As previously mentioned, front-drive machines generally require more maintenance than rear-drive elliptical trainers. Front-drive models use tracks that can get dirty, and they have more components to break down.

Cleaning: As the wheels move up and down the tracks of a front-drive elliptical, dirt can accumulate on the wheels and the track. This dirt can cause the motion to be rough and jerky. Regular cleaning is required to keep these surfaces free of dirt.

Most rear-drive elliptical trainers do not use the wheel/track system. Instead, these models have a floating system that uses free-rolling bearings. There are fewer components to maintain and no tracks or wheels to keep clean.

Tighten and Lubricate: To keep any elliptical trainer operating smoothly and efficiently, be sure to tighten any loose bolts and screws. (*Be sure to check for loose bolts and screws if you hear any unusual, loud noises.*) Also, routinely lubricate every moving part.

Avoid Misuse: Be sure that your elliptical trainer is large enough and strong enough to accommodate the needs of all users in your household. *Pay close attention to the maximum user weight!* If any users exceed the maximum user weight, excess stress on the machine may result in undue wear and tear.

Repairs: If you have a major problem with your elliptical trainer that you cannot resolve yourself, contact a qualified repairman to fix the problem.

Final Remarks:

Don't forget to find out about the mechanics of any elliptical trainers of interest before you make a purchase. You need to get answers to the following questions:

1. Does this elliptical trainer have ball bearings or bushings at the pivot points?
2. What kind of brake resistance system does this elliptical trainer have?
3. What kind of pedals come on this particular model? Are they articulating? Are they adjustable?

Compare different models within your price range that seem best suited to meet the needs of those who will be using the elliptical trainer. Keep in mind that moderate exercisers of average-to-small stature may be able to get by with a lower-end model. Larger users and more advanced athletes, however, would be better off in the long run buying a higher quality elliptical trainer. In the end, the more expensive model will give you a better return for your money, anyway.

If the cost concerns you, think of the purchase as an investment in your physical fitness and overall well-being. Isn't your health worth spending a little extra to get a unit that will make it possible to achieve your desired level of fitness?

We hope that this guide has better equipped you to go out and make an informed choice on an elliptical trainer. If you have any questions, please give one of our fitness consultants a call. Check our website for details.

Best of luck reaching your fitness goals!

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