



OPINION

# Is the Peloton Guide – the company’s new strength-training device – a worthy gym replacement?

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**SHAWNA COHEN**

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The sleek Peloton Guide costs \$395 and focuses on strength-training instead of cardio.

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When the world shut down in March, 2020, my family made popular pandemic investments to cheer us up including a puppy and Peloton Bike (no air fryer as of yet). On cold winter days, I'd wake up with grand plans to ride between Zoom meetings, endorphins pumping for school pickup. But I never did make it to that depressing, windowless basement.

As lockdown lingered, I opted for long walks or virtual strength-training classes, instead. I even took up rucking – walking or hiking with a weighted backpack. And so a Peloton Bike has joined the quiet ranks of the Xbox

console and IKEA sofa-bed in our home.

More than two years since COVID-19 altered the way we work, live, socialize and prioritize our to-do lists, I'm back at the gym. Coaches are giving high fives again. The usual crew is catching up and low-key venting about spouses between reps. And we're motivating each other, too: Data from sports participation platform Strava show that when we work out in groups, we tend to run and cycle 21-per-cent farther and work out 10-per-cent longer.

But with this newfound freedom come pre-pandemic responsibilities: tighter work deadlines, non-stop social events, shuttling the kids to and from activities. Time is once again a precious commodity.

So when Peloton invited me to test out its new AI-enabled strength-training device, I was reluctant, sure, but also curious. The Peloton Guide is the brand's first foray into strength-training hardware – a departure from its usual cardio-based offerings. Strength training, reduced body fat, increased muscle mass and stronger bones are some of the Guide's touted benefits.

During my demo of the Peloton Guide, the first thing I notice is the sleekness of the device. It's a fabric-covered camera resembling a small speaker that connects to your TV so you can watch yourself work out in a split-screen view next to a Peloton-approved instructor. The idea is to mirror their movements, using weights at home, while checking your own form.

(Be warned: I was initially shocked and uncomfortable to view myself on TV, which is massive compared to a smaller and smudgy laptop screen.)



The Peloton Guide taps into elements of gamification to keep users motivated.

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To keep you motivated, Peloton has incorporated the Movement Tracker. When you open the app, a series of strength classes appears at the top of the TV screen. During each class, exclusive to Guide users for seven weeks before they become available to all subscribers, the Movement Tracker logo in the shape of a drop of sweat is visible, too. As you go through your reps – bicep curls or overhead presses, for instance – the tracker counts them and the outline of the logo fills in with a brighter shade of aqua to indicate that you’re following along. You then earn credit for that movement. It’s a way to deter would-be cheaters from taking an extended rest or skipping a movement altogether.

Being super competitive, I’m immediately drawn to this feature and give it my all during an initial five-minute arm workout with celebrity instructor

Jess Sims. Ryan Rhodes, professor of health psychology in the School of Exercise Science at University of Victoria, says that exergames – exercises that involve some form of gamification – can indeed motivate people to work harder, at least in the short term.

“Research shows that when people are having fun and there’s a game involved, they’ll exert more energy with a lower perceived effort,” he explains. It has yet to be seen if the Guide’s credit system has the same effect, though it will certainly captivate some users (myself included).

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Another component of the Guide is its Body Activity feature. By analyzing your movements, the camera picks up on your progress and allows Peloton’s software to suggest future classes for you. It’s like Netflix for the fitness set. In addition to displaying metrics such heart rate and calories burned, the feature displays the parts of the body you just worked out, making it easier to choose what muscle groups to rest or prioritize during your next session.

Will this new technology finally encourage people like me to embrace home workouts? While it's not reinventing strength training, Peloton Guide is certainly making it more accessible. Since there's no bulky equipment, I can work out in my light-filled living room – a huge plus. There are convenience and flexibility factors, too: It's easy to complete bite-sized workouts on a whim, especially when you don't have the time or inclination to get to the gym (gas prices alone are reason enough to stay home).

“We see Guide fitting into a well-rounded fitness routine for members who want options for where, when and how they can fit working out into their lifestyles,” says Robin Arzon, Peloton's vice-president of fitness programming.

Just as we're seeing in office life, the future of the gym is hybrid; gyms worldwide are providing a mixture of in-person and virtual workouts. According to a recent report by management-software provider ABC Fitness Solutions and the IHRSA Foundation – a charitable organization that promotes health through exercise – workout frequency has increased since gyms have been allowed to re-open and consumers have come to expect hybrid workout models.

“Success drives motivation. If a home workout can make you feel like you have momentum, that has a massive effect on keeping you consistent. It's all about access,” Sean Blinch, co-owner of RedLeaf Fitness, a Toronto-based gym focusing on personal training and group fitness classes. Blinch has even encouraged clients to complement intense strength-based personal training sessions at the gym with at-home endurance exercise, such as riding a stationary bike in heart-rate Zone 2 (a level of intensity just above “easy”).

Virtual classes will never replace the energy that comes from working out in an actual gym – a place for people to connect and stay motivated. That human interaction is something I really missed during lockdown, and I'm not alone. According to February, 2021 research from management

consulting firm McKinsey & Company, 70 per cent of fitness consumers reported missing their gym as much as they missed family and friends.

That said, the Peloton Guide is a solid option for getting my sweat on during those hectic days when I can't make it to the gym or when lousy weather or general moodiness prevents me from even wanting to leave the house. Not surprisingly, research from McKinsey also found that 40 per cent of people surveyed now consider wellness a top priority in their daily lives, and when it comes to attaining these goals, there's no better motivator than choice. As Blinch says, "The best form of fitness is the one you'll do."

*The device retails for \$395, plus a \$30 monthly subscription to access Peloton's live and on-demand library (weights and heart-rate band are extra).*

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