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Slim Express

By Alison Brody

Slim Express sits nestled in the corner of a run-down strip-mall on Jefferson Boulevard in South Los Angeles. The year-old weight loss center borrows from some unconventional Asian workout trends to bring hope back to the unhealthily overweight. But their methods may be too good to be true.

Upon entering the fitness establishment, the urban mix of graffiti, traffic noise and soot gives way to clean walls painted in muted green and yellow, accompanied by the sounds of soft pop music. Exercise machines sit in a neat row in front of a large mirror. But if you're looking for treadmills and elliptical machines, you've come to the wrong place.

The workout regimen here consists of a trip to the sauna, a stint on a vibrating machine, and a turn on a mechanical horse, the members' favorite.

"Your weight is jumping all over the place, but it's real easy because all you do is just hold on like you're at a rodeo," says 34-year-old LeShawn Miles, whose weight has gone from 225 to 185 in 10 months.

She says since shedding the pounds she has more energy, she no longer feels numbness in her hands, and her joints don't ache.

Bob Girandola, associate professor of kinesiology at the University of Southern California, is skeptical of Slim Express' approach.

"The simple rule of thumb when it comes to calorie expenditure is work equals calories," he says. "So, for example in this horse riding, if you're just holding on you might burn a few calories, but it's not going to burn the calories it would if you were actually moving pedals around with your own force."

But for women like LeShawn, who say their weight always made exercise difficult, sacrificing a couple of calories is no big deal. Nearly 50 percent of Slim Express' 100 members come everyday. Among the dedicated, the pounds are coming off.

Girandola says if these machines are allowing women who never felt comfortable exercising to engage in physical activity, then that's what counts. "I would prefer to see somebody going on a normal diet and a normal exercise program," Girandola says. "But if they've lost 20 to 50 pounds they have my blessing and by all means they should continue."