

Argus Leader

Could health savings accounts help fund gym memberships, sports fees?

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Gym memberships and youth sports fees could be paid for using pre-tax health savings accounts under a measure set to be considered by Congress.

The so-called Personal Health Investment Today Act, or PHIT Act, is being proposed by the fitness industry to help promote physical activity.

While it would have a slight impact on federal income, backers say costs could be offset in the long-term by the reduced health care costs associated with better physical fitness. Opponents said opening up the savings accounts for the specified fitness use constitutes "special interest legislation."

If approved, the measure would allow people to pay for gym memberships, running shoes, treadmills, or youth sports fees with funds from their pre-tax health savings accounts. People who receive health insurance through their employer or through the federal exchange currently have the choice of setting aside a portion of each paycheck to pay for out-of-pocket health care, dental care or vision costs before taxes are taken from that amount.

The proposal would allow people to pull up to \$2,000 annually from those accounts to pay for fitness-related expenses with some restrictions for what people can use the money for, for example, no \$300 running shoes.

Various lawmakers have tried and failed to pass the act in years past, but supporters hope its bipartisan base of support and strong backer in U.S. Sen. John Thune will help carry it in early 2017.

Thune said he supports the idea of allowing people to have greater flexibility with their health savings accounts and motivating people to get active with the additional incentives to run a race or join a gym.

"If we can encourage folks to make better health decisions that encourage health and prevention, we should do that," Thune said.

Tom Cove, CEO of the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, said the group views Thune as a perfect fit to carry the bill.

"We could not be happier," he said. "We feel lucky, almost blessed."

Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Libertarian Cato Institute, said lawmakers should reconsider the proposal, which he described as "special interest legislation."