Too much too soon: The dangers of overtraining

Runners are often told they only improve by working harder or running more mileage and more often. "And that is the truth," says Dick Wilks, a coach and running clinic manager with Health Quarters in Burlington, Ont. "But what runners often don't get told is they have to structure that hard work properly so they can recover. If they don't, they're going to get stopped by overtraining syndrome."

There's a fine line between training hard and overtraining, and runners seem to cross it far too often. Overtraining occurs when the body is pushed to its limits, without enough time to rest and recover. It can lead to fatigue, sluggishness, flu-like symptoms and a decrease in energy and strength. Once you hit that wall, you may simply lose your motivation to run altogether. "When you've overtrained, you can really lose your enthusiasm for the sport," Wilks says. "It gets so difficult to get out there and run, you think you're not suited to it and you stop."

Unfortunately, the warning signs aren't easy to spot and most runners don't figure it out until it's too late.

"It's not like a red light goes off when you're overtraining," says Kris Andrews, owner of PUSH Fitness and Performance Training in Halifax, and a consultant with the Scotiabank Blue Nose Marathon. "It slowly creeps in there over time, and when it's there, it's chronic."

Symptoms of overtraining include an elevated resting heart rate, difficulty sleeping, a decreased appetite and a lack of energy. In fact, Andrews says many runners confuse the symptoms with that of a low-grade flu and try to push through it instead of taking a break. If you do have symptoms, Andrews suggests cutting back on running for a few weeks until they're gone. Try a different physical activity during that time, he advises.

Andrews tells his clients to do only half of what they were doing before the break. "For example, if you were running seven days a week, do something three days a week that's completely different than running." Try biking, swimming, spinning or cross-training, or even just rest. It will give both your body and mind a break. "You need to recharge your batteries. Running is supposed to be a fun experience," he says.

The good news is it's relatively easy to prevent overtraining syndrome. All you need is a proper training plan with four key components:

Rest days

"People need to think of rest and recovery as part of their program," Andrews says. To make fitness improvements, you must have both a stimulus and a response. Running is the stimulus and rest is the response. If your plan doesn't include at least one day of rest per week, you're not only at risk of overtraining, you're not going to get the results you want.

Steady mileage increases

As a general rule of thumb, your mileage should increase by no more than 10 per cent per week until you reach your maximum target. That means if you ran a total of 50K in one week of a training plan, run 55K the next week. Depending on your current state of fitness, you may be able to increase a little more than 10 per cent, but Wilks doesn't recommend going beyond a 20 per cent jump in a week.

Back-off weeks

A good training plan will take into account something called periodization, Wilks says. "Runners will adapt to the workload within a four or five week period," he explains. "Every five to six weeks, you have to back off and let that adaptation take place so you're ready for the next level." That means your plan should have a lower mileage week built in every five to six weeks before ramping up to the next level.

A taper period

The length of your taper period will depend on the type of race you're training for, but any good training plan will start to decrease your mileage before a race to ensure you're in the best shape on race day. "In the last two weeks of a training program, there's not a lot more you can do," Wilks says. "There just isn't enough time to improve, so why cram it in? I've run the best races of my life when I've tapered well. I've trained well, I've rested well and I've tapered before the race."

A Pain in the Patella

The real risk of overtraining isn't that you'll feel tired and sluggish; it's that you're putting yourself at a much higher risk of injury, which could end your running career for good. There's a good chance that injury is going to be in the knee, often called "runner's knee." According to Dr. Reed Ferber, director of the University of Calgary's Running Injury Clinic, 80 per cent of overuse injuries occur from the knee down, most of them being patella femoral pain syndrome, a pain under the kneecap.

"The classic symptom is that it hurts when you stop running," Ferber warns. "In the early stages, people don't feel it while they're running. As soon as they stop running, within a few minutes, they can feel pain underneath their kneecap. A lot of people ignore it because it doesn't hurt while they're running. They continue to run on it, and then it starts to hurt all the time." That's when you can do permanent damage.

There are four factors that contribute to injury, Ferber says. The first two – anatomical alignment and body mechanics – you can't change. Anatomical alignment is how one bone is positioned relative to another and it's something you're stuck with. (That includes being bow-legged, knock-kneed, or having rigid arches.) As for your mechanics, Ferber isn't a big fan of trying to change that either. "I think people should run the way they want to run," he says. "Changing that can cause injury, because it's very difficult to sustain that change in the long term."

The other two factors – strength and flexibility – you can change. Improving your strength is the most important thing you can do to prevent runner's knee. Lack of hip strength is what accounts for 80 per cent of the problem, Ferber says. By strengthening your hip stabilizers through specific exercises, you can not only treat the condition, but prevent it as well.

Finally, Ferber says improving flexibility can also prevent and treat runner's knee. That doesn't mean simply stretching after a run, though. He recommends stretching at all times of the day, not just during workouts. Try taking a yoga class (many studios now offer yoga for runners) or getting a personal trainer to help establish a good stretching routine.

Don't Rush the Marathon Prep

The risk of overtraining and injury increases dramatically if you try to run too far, too soon. "You see it all the time," says Kris Andrews, a personal trainer in Halifax. "It's like a life-changing moment on the couch. Someone finishes the last piece of pizza and

decides they're going to run a marathon in eight weeks… and that doesn't ever work out too well."

Instead, most coaches and experts recommend taking a slow and steady approach to increasing your distance. "I would say it takes about two years (for people with no prior running experience) to be ready to run your first marathon," says Dick Wilks, a coach in Burlington, Ont. "You have to be smart about it and give yourself an opportunity to succeed at any distance."

The body needs time to adapt to the mileage. If you progress too quickly, your risk of injury is much higher. "The most popular marathon training program is a four-month program," says Dr. Reed Ferber, director of the University of Calgary's Running Injury Clinic. "It has about a 50 per cent injury rate associated with it."

Slow and steady is much better when you're trying to master a new distance, says Ferber. His program is eight-months long, and he says it has a 95 per cent success rate for first-time runners. The mileage only increases by four to five per cent a week, which Ferber says is much better for new runners. It reduces the risk of injury, and, most importantly, gets them to the finish line healthy, injury-free, and ready to continue running for many years to come.