

Injuries: the bane of an athlete's life!

MIKE SEARLE explains why you might be getting injured.

A Familiar Scenario?

Does this sound at all familiar? Your training is going well, very well in fact and you really feel that you're making progress. Perhaps you've been increasing your distances, weekly mileage or pace – or possibly all three; and you're now starting to reap the fruits of your labours in the form of improved training and race times. You're starting to feel almost invincible but all of a sudden, injury strikes and you find yourself unable to train, let alone race, and all your hard work over the preceding months has been undone. Or has it? Thousands of runners will identify with this situation and you would be forgiven for thinking that you'll be back to square one when you are eventually able to lace up your favourite trainers again. However, help is at hand because there are many useful and positive steps that you can take to accelerate your recovery, maintain muscle strength and flexibility and keep your hard-earned cardiovascular fitness, so that you can return to pounding out the miles sooner rather than later.

Taking Stock

The enforced period of reduced training that follows an injury should be viewed as an opportunity to assess how and why you became injured in the first place. There are numerous causative factors for injuries and evaluating the reasons for yours will help in targeting your specific diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation but equally importantly, will also help you to plan ahead so that the injury doesn't recur once you are back in full training. Typical causes of running injuries are:

Too Much Too Soon

The very action of running, where you repeat the same actions thousands of times during each session, can lead to overuse injuries. Additionally, if you then factor in too rapid an increase in mileage, then injury can occur. As a rule of thumb, avoid increasing your total weekly distance or the maximum distance of your longest run by more than 10%. This will allow your body to gradually adapt to the increased stresses that you are subjecting it to.



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Too Fast Too Often

Faster paced running will certainly make you a faster runner but it also increases the stresses placed upon your body, such as greater surface impact and potential muscle strains as the muscles stretch further with your increased stride length and faster cadence. The 10% rule can be applied to faster runs, whereby your fast quality sessions (excluding warm-up and cool-down) do not exceed 10% of your total weekly mileage.

Too little Recovery

Improvements from training don't occur during the training session itself but in the rest periods when you are not training. Training fatigues and stresses your entire body such that during your rest days and recovery workouts your body repairs and rebuilds itself, adapting to cope with the increased load that you have subjected it to. Omit rest days and recovery sessions and you are denying your body the chance to repair and make those vital improvements and you are then heading down the road towards breakdown.

Choice of Running Surface

Different running surfaces place different demands upon the body. Off-road running challenges the body's balance and coordination far more than road running because of the unstable environment that you continually place yourself in. If you are unused to off-road running, the more challenging demands on your knees and ankles alone as they work to keep you upright and moving forward, can lead to muscle and tendon pulls. Equally, devotion to a sole running surface such as concrete and tarmac can lead to conditions such as shin splints or overuse injuries. The solution is to vary your running surfaces and introduce any changes gradually.

Supplementary Training (e.g.: gym work)

Correct resistance training can bring about considerable improvements to your running style and strength (see British Runner, November 2004) but it is very easy to do either the wrong training or the right training wrong.

For example; a runner trying to build leg strength in the gym, concentrating solely on building up their quadriceps muscles (front of the thigh), could develop an imbalance between the strength in the quadriceps and the hamstring muscles, which could lead to a hamstring pull.

Shoe Problems

With such a huge range of running shoes available covering every type of running action, it is easy to purchase a pair that are completely unsuitable for your gait. The solution is to seek out specialist advice from dedicated running retailers, who can advise you on the best



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footwear choices for your type of foot and foot movement.

Insufficient Flexibility

Flexibility problems account for a high proportion of running injuries because flexibility work is typically the most neglected area of training. Tight, inflexible muscles are far more likely to succumb to injury due to their reduced range of movement and functionality. Regular flexibility work will help keep your body in balance, your muscles pliable and loose and also ensure that your range of motion is not compromised.

Racing

Racing can be very different to training. The adrenaline flows, competitive instincts take over and you strive to achieve that long-held goal. A single race alone can cause injury as you push yourself harder than usual and too frequent competitive outings can also result in injury because you are subjecting your body to greater stresses repeatedly, without adequate recovery. The solution is not to over-race and always allow sufficient post-race recovery. Utilising strategies such as lighter and reduced training, more stretching and sports massage after completing an event will give your muscles time to repair in readiness for their next exertion.

Stages of Injury Repair

Soft tissue injuries can vary widely from minor muscle strains to complete muscle or tendon ruptures and each injury and patient should be treated accordingly. The following stages typically represent the different phases of healing and repair following injury.

Stage 1 – Inflammatory

This stage typically lasts from 24 – 48 hours, with symptoms including swelling, pain and reduced function.

Stage 2 – Repair

The repair stage lasts from 3 – 21 days and during this phase, the injury begins to heal.

Stage 3 – Remodelling

Remodelling, where the tissues continue to reform, can continue for anything up to two years, depending on the nature and severity of the injury.

Find out more about injury rehabilitation next month.