

Too Much of a Good Thing

A little exercise is good for you, so more must be better, right? Well, sometimes. And sometimes more is just that—more. There comes a point of diminishing returns or, worse, a point where your body says “Enough!” Everyone reaches this point at different times. Triathletes, for example, are able to withstand the rigors of three-sport training—running, cycling and swimming—at levels unthinkable to most. For others, an extra step class or hitting the weights too hard can put them over the top. In the quest for better health and fitness, it is sometimes difficult to quell one’s enthusiasm and take a break from exercise. But if exercise is leaving you more exhausted than energized, you could be suffering from an acute case of overtraining.

Know the Signs

It’s important to be able to recognize the signs of overtraining before they become chronic. Physical signs of overtraining include:

- Decreased performance
- Loss of coordination
- Prolonged recovery
- Elevated morning heart rate
- Elevated resting blood pressure
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Muscle soreness/tenderness
- Gastrointestinal disturbances
- Decreased ability to ward off infection
- Increased incidence of musculoskeletal injuries
- Disturbed sleep patterns

Keep in mind that not all of the signs of overtraining are physical. Much like regular exercise has a positive effect on mood and stress levels, too much exercise can do just the opposite, leaving the exerciser irritable and depressed, particularly as the quality of the workouts declines. Psychological and emotional signs of overtraining include depression, apathy, difficulty concentrating, emotional sensitivity and reduced self-esteem.



Understand the Cause

Once you recognize the symptoms of overtraining, it’s important to understand and honestly confront the cause. For some, overtraining occurs as a result of an upcoming competition.

Increased training prior to an event is understandable, but if it’s interfering with your health and well-being, you have to question its worth. The solution may be as easy as reducing the rate at which you increase your training intensity. The body needs sufficient time to adjust to your increased demands.

Triathletes don’t start out running 10 miles, cycling 100 miles and swimming 1000 meters all at once. They gradually increase their training to allow their bodies to adapt. For others, the basis for overtraining may have more to do with emotional or psychological reasons than physical ones. Much like eating disorders, exercise addiction is now recognized as a legitimate problem. Exercising

beyond the point of exhaustion, while injured, or to the exclusion of other aspects of one’s life are some of the signs of exercise addiction. It’s a difficult problem to recognize, particularly in a culture where discipline and control are lauded.

Individuals who exercise excessively are risking more than poor performance: They're risking their health. Overuse syndrome, which may lead to more serious injuries, is common. And the emotional cost of isolating oneself to exercise can be devastating. If you recognize these symptoms in yourself or in a friend, it is essential that you seek professional help.

The "M" Word

The key, it seems, to staying healthy is to do everything in moderation, which is best viewed as something relative to one's own fitness level and goals. Don't expect to exercise an hour every day simply because your very fit friend does. The body needs time to adjust, adapt and, yes, even recuperate. Exercising to the point of overtraining is simply taking one step forward, two steps back—not exactly good training tactics.

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