



The Doc Is In

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Body Language

WHY DO RUNNERS GET INJURED SO OFTEN?

Part II

You may recall from last month's newsletter (which I'm sure is now stored away in your safe deposit box) that runners seem to get injured frequently due to three major factors:

1. Running has narrow tolerances for biomechanical distortions and imbalances in our joints, muscles and connective tissues.
2. Running can be easily sabotaged by numerous external factors, such as how we work, sit, drive and sleep, as well as what shoes we wear, the surfaces we run on, etc.
3. Runners are notorious for over-training.

So, armed with this wisdom, how can we minimize our chances of becoming lame, limping, grumbling non-runners?

First off, take very good care of your running machinery. In particular, aim to reduce your unique pattern of distortions and imbalances via a patient, diligent program of stretching and strengthening. Running, of course, is incredibly effective at enhancing aerobic endurance, but it's next to worthless at improving general flexibility and head-to-toe strength. While stretching and strengthening may feel like unpleasant chores to someone who just wants to romp in the woods, these two other components of fitness are often critically important in managing running injuries and -- bonus! -- they can also enhance race performance.

So, consider starting a routine of post-run or evening stretches, as well as plugging in a couple sessions of strength training per week, which can include free weights, machines, swimming, yoga, pull ups, push ups, crunches, etc.

Secondly, recognize that even the most devoted, high mileage runner spends only about 5% of the week actually running. The remaining 95% of the time is spent sitting, working, driving, sleeping, letting the cat in and out of the house, etc., and it is what we do during these other hours that often creates trouble that emerges only when we run. Perhaps the most common example of this phenomenon is the achy, aggravating stiffness and pain which develop around the hips in a runner, resulting in a shorter, less fluid gait and slower race times. The usual culprit? Sitting. Sitting, sitting, sitting for hundreds of hours, at a computer, in a car, in front of the TV. The solution: sit less, if possible, but most importantly, counteract the compression and restriction induced by the sitting by ... you guessed it, stretching.

Other factors which may insidiously wreak havoc upon a runner include the shoes we wear at work and while running, ergonomic and postural distortions, muscle tension induced by emotional distress, and congenital imbalances in our skeletons (e.g., leg length discrepancies, spinal curvatures, over-pronation of the feet).



Finally, to paraphrase Pogo, we have met the runner's worst enemy and he or she is us. Diplomatically, we competitive runners could describe ourselves as enthusiastic, self-disciplined, highly motivated and goal oriented. Stated more bluntly, we all exhibit varying degrees of obsessive-compulsive behavior. We all know runners (look in the mirror, perhaps?) who are chronically injured because they are chained to some arbitrary weekly mileage goal, they run workouts and races loaded up on Advil and they simply refuse to embrace the concepts of rest, recovery, cross-training and the limitations of mammalian physiology. Remembering that too much of a good thing ain't no good at all, balance your love of running with adequate recovery and replace that old notion of high volume training with lower volume, higher quality workouts and essential rest. Don't be a slave to your logbook.

Wow, that's all pretty heavy stuff. Are we really that wayward and whacked? Should you just forget this running nonsense and join the bingo club? Indeed you should!... on your 95th birthday. Until then, with a little luck, you can continue joyfully running and racing, by staying healthy, taking good care of your parts and by training wisely. See you on the trails.

--Alec Isabeau, D.C.

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Addendum to Part Two:

By and large, the ideas on injury prevention in the 2001 article remain valid, but there are, as expected, some revisions to consider. We place less emphasis now on traditional static stretching as an injury prevention tool; now, we push functional strength training and core stabilization exercises. While stretching remains vital, it's no longer considered the cure-all we thought it was years ago and there's some dispute as to how we should actually perform stretching. We also now supplement stretching with self-massage maneuvers using foam rollers and massage sticks.

The biggest change in strength training has been the discarding of machine-based exercises and the return to "primitive" full body training with free weights and body-weight exercises (e.g., push-ups, pull-ups, squats, lunges, deadlifts, kettlebell training, etc.). There's some concern, in fact, that machine-based strength training may actually be *detrimental* to athletic performance, as it might distort fundamental movement patterns which are crucial for natural, multi-planar athletic activities.

Currently, as anyone who has hobbled into my office can attest, injury prevention and rehab focuses on developing and maintaining a reliable foundation of symmetric, quality movement patterns. On top of this foundation, we then start adding quantity, load, complexity and sport-specific skills. We now make a big deal of hip stability, lower limb alignment and the development of a fluid, light, primitive running pattern. And we still rail against prolonged sitting and compulsive running, which will never do us any good.