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Article Name: How to Avoid Overtraining

Author: By Hunter Allen

Overtraining is defined as excessive training characterized by long-lasting fatigue and worsening of competitive performance with further attempts to improve condition.¹ It may also be described as staleness, over-work, over-reaching, burn-out and chronic fatigue. As a runner, your improvements hinge on progressively increasing the training load. This concept is different from overtraining, in which a vicious circle develops with more training producing lower performance and chronic fatigue.

How many times have you, in your zeal to improve, gone out and ran harder than you know you should have? The legs were still tired from the past weekends runs and even yesterday's easy recovery run, but, you are excited about that upcoming 10K and want to set a PR. So, off you go running but you can't go quite as fast as you want to and the speed workouts seem more like the way your grandmother used to drive in the left lane on the highway. You are now feeling overtraining coming on stronger than a 68' Buick in the left lane.

Now, the question is: How do you train hard and still make gains, but not get into the downward spiral of overtraining?

Well, in order to answer that, we need to examine the definition of overtraining more thoroughly. In the above definition, overtraining is long-lasting fatigue and worsening of competitive performance. So, you must recognize the difference between the fatigue of yesterdays' run and the leg-deadening fatigue of the cumulation of the past months' worth of runs.

This is not an easy thing to do, but it is made easier through experience, the use of a heart rate monitor and the recognition of the symptoms of overtraining.

Here are the main symptoms of overtraining that you should look for and then compare them to the normal feelings that you experience after a hard workout.

1. Deep muscle soreness and chronic injuries: the muscles are so sore, that they feel heavy and are sore to the bone. If you are always getting those nagging little injuries, or if you have an injury that just won't go away, then it might be time to rest.
2. Inability to raise heart rate to desired level: If wearing a HRM, then this is very easy to see. You just plain won't be able to get your heart rate up to your anaerobic threshold day after day. If one day your heart rate won't come up to your desired level and then you rest for a couple of days, you should be able to get it up the following day. On the other side of the coin, if overtrained, your morning resting heart rate will be abnormally high.

3. Loss of appetite and diarrhea. Basically, you get so tired of eating everything in sight that you eventually, just don't feel like eating anything. It must be a pretty extreme case of overtraining for this to occur.
4. Sore-throats, flu-like symptoms, recurrent infections, a depressed immune system. It is more common in overtrained athletes than in the general population to have sore throats and flu-like symptoms. They also generally last longer. This is because the white blood cells, the main component of the immune system, may be decreased by repeated bouts of intense, prolonged exercise. Some very recent research suggests that falls in the blood concentration of glutamine, an amino acid essential for the optimal function of white blood cells, may also be implicated in causing the immuno-suppression associated with heavy training.
5. Problems with getting to sleep and the perception of not getting enough sleep. This is very common, so common among people who are overtrained, that it should almost be a law... Every athlete that I have ever worked with and been around has always exhibited this symptom when starting to become overtrained. In multiple day athletic events, such as the Tour De France, where the athletes are chronically overtrained, a large majority of them have to take some sort of sedative to sleep after each stage of the race.

Now, that you know what overtraining is and the symptoms, you have a better idea of how to avoid it. Remember, you still must train hard and push your body in order to improve. The basic principle of training is $\text{Stress} + \text{Rest} = \text{Maximum Improvement}$. Therefore, stretch yourself on training runs, but don't go overboard. Here are a few recommendations to help avoid overtraining and immuno-suppression:

1. Monitor mood, feelings of fatigue and muscle soreness during training. Decrease training load if the normal session feels harder than usual.
2. Include one or two days of rest/recovery in the weekly training program; more training is not always better.
3. REST when you are sick. No strenuous exercise if you have a sore throat, cold or other systemic infection. Build up the level of training gradually following any illness.
4. Make sure to eat well, with the appropriate carbohydrate/protein, vitamin and energy intake. Give me a call for advice if you have questions.
5. Make sure to get adequate sleep and try to minimize psychological stress.
6. Try for at least 7 hours of sleep a night and learn some relaxation/mediation techniques.

Good luck in your training in the next couple of months and keep that goal in front of you and with the proper training, rest and nutrition, you will make it ! Go for it !

Make it a healthy day.

¹ Overtraining, Muscle Damage and Immune Function, Dr. Michael Gleeson. Sport Nutrition Insider Vol.5 , #4 1-3, Nov. 1997



Contact Us:

www.peakscoaching.com

info@peascoachinggroup.com

Address: 414 Jackson St. Bedford, VA 24523

Phone: 540-587-9025 fax: 540-586-5715