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Do you take recovery as seriously as you take your training? Whether you're a beginner or elite, it's necessary to rest your body at least weekly, if not more, to reduce the physical (not to mention mental) toll that hard exercise can have on your body. Recovery can come in different forms, and it's not an excuse to binge watch your favorite Netflix series while chowing down on the comfort food of your choice. Instead, it might mean going for a leisurely bike ride to move the lactic acid built up in your legs from running, or opting for a long walk with your dog rather than another high intensity spin class. Need more convincing? Here are five reasons why recovery is important and five corresponding methods on how to recover well.

1. Reduce Muscle Damage

Dr. Timothy Noakes, the author of the indispensable *Lore of Running*, believes that recovery takes longer than most people think or expect. Prolonged activities like marathons or triathlons damage muscles and, as Noakes states, "recovery from this damage takes

substantially longer than was originally thought.” One study that Noakes cites sampled marathon runners before, after, and then three, five, and seven days post-marathon. Muscle cell damage was present in the immediately after in addition to the three and five days post-marathon samples. But, damage was also seen in the muscles a week after the marathon and, even worse, in the pre-race samples, too. This meant that many of the athletes were attempting the marathon with cell damage already visible, likely from lack of recovery prior to the event. The study concluded that the worse the pain following a race, the longer the recovery period needs to be.

What to do: Following races longer than a marathon—although, intense recovery may be needed in distances as short as 5K—it’s necessary to give your body the proper time to rest before beginning activity. For gym rats, that means *full rest*. Was your half-marathon or marathon effort hard? Did you feel sore following the event? It might be necessary to take a full week or two off of running before you begin again. Keep in mind that elite athletes only race one or two key races *each year*. Following an event, smart elites do nothing for two weeks, then ease back in with recovery activities like walking, biking or swimming.

2. Lessen Chronic Muscle Fatigue

Muscle damage and muscle fatigue might sound similar, but one is simply the continued product of another. Chronic muscle fatigue, as Noakes explains, can occur in daily training over a period of time if no recovery or rest is scheduled between heavy training cycles. This [story](#), which focuses on the daily life of someone with an extreme case of chronic muscle fatigue, illustrates what happens to athletes of both the elite and amateur level who don’t prioritize recovery and rest. [New evidence](#) is even suggesting that damage can be done at the neurological level, too. Overtraining—that is, training your body so hard that it is unable to recover—can even affect the ability for your brain to recruit your muscles, making everyday activities like picking up your child or walking up a flight of stairs unbearably difficult.

What to do: Not everyone is on the cusp of chronic muscle fatigue, but if you’re an avid exercise enthusiast it’s worth giving your body periods of complete recovery and rest a few times each year. Some athletes like to take off a month each year—like December, which is often already packed with holiday activities—while others like to work their rest periods into planned vacations over the summer. Pick a few weeks of the year that work for you and do your best to refrain from *any* hard training. If you get antsy, pick up a new hobby or start that cleaning project you’ve been putting off.

3. Boost Your Immune System

Did you know that physical stress can weaken your immune system? While the average gym-goer is likely to see positive immune benefits from working out, endurance athletes can fall victim to immunodepression, an effect looked at in detail in [this study](#). While the study focuses on ways to combat immunodepression through better nutritional choices, increasing recovery and/or rest time can also help. [Another study](#), published in 2003, tracked overtrained athletes. Their conclusions suggested a high correlation between reduced immunity and overtraining.

What to do: Holistic health care is all about prevention, and in this case preventing a downed immune system is the way to go. Lessen your training volume as soon as you start feeling more tired, sore, or cranky than your typical training has you feeling. Ensure that big races or events are followed by even bigger periods of rest and recovery. Eating a diet high in probiotics and low in processed foods and sugar can also help.

4. Keep “Burn Out” Out

Burn out might sound lighthearted but it can have a devastating effect for people who identify strongly with a sport or workout. Burn out is essentially the lack of motivation and desire to perform an activity you usually love, like running, cycling, or swimming. Sometimes burn out can lead to quitting a sport entirely, even for elite athletes. This study, published by the *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, documented a young, male triathlete over the course of 45 days. The end result suggested that the triathlete had developed both overtraining and athlete burnout.

What to do: While more research needs to be done to clarify exactly what it means to have “athlete burnout,” proper recovery and rest should be prioritized. One method that can help stop the eventual landslide of overtraining is journaling. Simply bring a journal with you to your training sessions, or record your workout once finished at home. Write down the length, the intensity, and how you felt before and after your workout. Consider your mental side in this: were you excited to sweat? Did you dread your workout, knowing how much it would hurt? Journaling can be a useful way of tracking any abnormalities in your physical and psychological health.

5. Keep Your Hormones in Check

Long endurance events can seriously disrupt hormones that both males and females need to function everyday. This *Runner’s World* article breaks down several studies to conclude that more research is needed to determine if running shuts down one’s thyroid functions. Several elite athletes, however, have suffered from major thyroid problems and it’s relatively well known that overtraining can result in amenorrhea for women (the loss of one’s period) and low testosterone for men.

What to do: Rest and recovery is key here, along with the proper nutrients and calories to fuel your body. To avoid overtraining, try blocking off one day each week and devote the time you’d spend training to or working out to volunteering, enjoying lunch with a friend, journaling, preparing a new recipe, or even taking a nap.

Our bodies are our only vessels during this lifetime. Treat them like you would treat a child—with respect, compassion, and lots of patience. Recover well!

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