Are you overexercising? Why you should work rest into your workout routine

May 25 2022, by Taylor Hisey Pierson

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After months of being cooped up thanks to cold weather and omicron, many of us are eager to hit the pavement or gym.

And while exercise has its perks—physically and mentally—sometimes you need to give it a rest.

"It's pretty rare for high-performing athletes—and even less for the general population—to think they're overexercising or overtraining," says Joshua Blomgren, DO, a sports medicine physician at Rush. "What usually ends up happening is people keep pushing themselves until they reach a point of physical breakdown or injury, which is a dangerous place to be."

Exercise—especially intense exercise—puts a lot of stress on our bodies. So when we do too much of it without letting our bodies recover, we risk doing more harm than good.

Doing the same activity not only becomes repetitive, Blomgren says, but it works the same muscle groups to the point that it can damage muscle tissues and overload your body. "This can make it difficult to achieve the desired body adaptions," he says.

So how much is too much exercise?

Here's a guide to help determine whether you're overtraining—and what to do about it.

The signs of overexercising and overtraining

If you exercise too much, you may find that you are often tired, don't sleep well, have mood swings or experience overuse injuries.

Here are a few other signs to be aware of:

- Increased heart rate
- Not feeling as strong

- Lacking physical performance
- Difficulty reaching fitness goals
- Exercise stops being invigorating
- Changes in metabolic function

The importance of rest

Rest is sometimes unfairly associated with laziness, but it's a good thing. By taking an exercise break, muscle tissues have time to repair themselves and build their strength.

And rest days don't have to mean no exercise at all. They can include walking, slow jogging, biking and yoga, among other lower-impact activities.

"Sometimes when we diagnose someone with overexercising, it can be a fairly hard thing to accept," Blomgren says. "But in reality, these people need to significantly back off from the amount and intensity of exercises that they're doing to let the body catch up."

Blomgren recommends periodization for active people—that is, intentionally mixing up or planning different variables of training including intensity, activity and rest days.

"By incorporating periodization into your workout routine, you're being mindful of the bigger picture and your body's accumulation over time," he says. "You're helping your body not experience the same type of trauma every day and letting it recover, so you can reach your fitness goals."

The influence of the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us had more time to exercise and jumped on the latest workout trends, such as Peloton bikes and online workout classes.

"Virtual workout trends became particularly appealing to people because they not only were able to connect with others but there's a bit of competitiveness to it, too," Blomgren says.

And the increase in use of social media during the pandemic allowed many people to publish their successes online and keep track of their gains, times and number of repetitions that they do with a specific exercise.

"By posting online, such as a new personal record or the latest workout challenge, it feeds the addictive centers of the brain," Blomgren says. "This can in turn contribute to pushing yourself a bit harder than one normally would for the sake of more likes or for people to take notice."

How to safely exercise

Exercise can help improve nearly every aspect of your health, but it's important to follow safe and healthy guidelines.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends [healthy adults](#) aged 18 to 65 years old participate in moderate intensity aerobic activity for 30 minutes, five days per week, or vigorous intensity aerobic activity for a minimum of 20 minutes, three days per week.

They suggest adults perform activities that maintain muscular strength and endurance two days per week.

"These weekly targets not only keep you healthy but also allow you to live a balanced life," Blomgren says.

Blomgren adds a few tips to help you exercise safely:

- Engage in a balanced exercise routine that includes both [strength training](#) and cardio
- Follow the 10% rule—not increasing the amount or intensity of exercise by more than 10% a week
- Incorporate rest days into your [workout routine](#) to aid in recovery and training adaptation
- Eat a [balanced diet](#) that is high in quality energy sources
- Get enough sleep each night (about eight hours)

Provided by Rush University Medical Center