

Information to Optimize Your Health & Fitness, Naturally

Overtraining Syndrome: What it is, what to do

It is nearly the middle of the summer season, and you are approaching the top of your fitness from the off-season. Or so you think. You've been feeling overly tired, achy, irritable and perhaps even burned out. To make things worse, the rest of life is affecting you with stressors in the form of time constraints, personal relationships, and work. Because of this, your performance has "hit the wall"; you just aren't improving. What is going on?

You may be training too hard. Constantly sore muscles sleep difficulty, and frequent illness (especially in the form of colds) may be your body telling you that it cannot cope with all of the stress; you are developing overtraining syndrome.

What is overtraining syndrome?

Simply put, too much physical training and not enough rest and recovery leads to major amounts of stress on your body. Further stressors caused by worry, fear, conflicts, etc. all compound and reach a point where your body can no longer repair itself adequately. Thus, the physical, mental, and emotional symptoms of overtraining syndrome.

True, fatigue and soreness are normal following a series of intense workouts/events. However, if they never completely resolve, and your performance is affected, it may be overtraining syndrome.

Although not a 'disease' in the truest sense, overtraining is a serious condition and if left untreated can lead to drastic changes in hormone levels, affecting many other organ systems in the body. Exercise is a stress on the body, and if excessive it will affect you just like other forms of mental and emotional stress. When the body feels these excessive stressors, it responds by altering hormonal levels. Unfortunately, this results in even more negative symptoms.

How is overtraining treated?

Initially, a period of rest is recommended; the amount of rest is related to how long symptoms have been present. Light cross training is allowed, and the rest period is also useful for addressing other sources of stress. Dietary adjustments, certain physical therapies, and massage can help. More importantly, testing hormone levels and treating any alterations is a vital part of treatment. Specific nutritional, supplemental, and hormonal therapies can speed the recovery process, helping you get back to normal.

In men, overtraining leads to declining levels of testosterone. The primary male sex hormone, testosterone normally begins to decline in a man's 30's. Coupled with excessive exercise and stress, testosterone levels decline leading to problems with motivation, fatigue, burn out, sexual performance, and even sets the stage for osteoporosis. In women, menses can become irregular as estrogen and progesterone are secreted in lesser and unequal amounts, leading to menstrual irregularities, infertility, and breast tenderness. Testosterone levels actually increase in women,

leading to male-like symptoms of increased hair growth and balding. In both sexes, the main stress hormone cortisol initially rises, and can lead to fat deposition around the midsection, bone loss, and eventually adrenal burnout which is marked by difficulty sleeping, morning fatigue and sugar craving.

Can overtraining be prevented?

Yes, to an extent. Proper rest and recovery time is vital. A hard week of training should be followed by a few days of light training with a day off completely. Heavy weeks and months of training should include time for recovery so that you are well rested before important competitions. A training log is a good way to track progress and to watch for symptoms of overtraining. Talk to a doctor if you feel that you have symptoms of overtraining early in the process; symptoms are similar to other medical problems so it is important to be evaluated as soon as possible.

Common Symptoms of Overtraining

Workout Symptoms	Physical Symptoms	Non-physical Symptoms
Usual workouts feel more difficult Early fatigue during workouts Faster heart rate with less effort Decreased strength Decreased coordination Physical challenges seem too hard Decreased performance on strength, speed, or endurance testing	Persistent fatigue Ongoing muscle soreness Loss of appetite Increased aches and pains Increase in overuse injuries Frequent colds or infections	Difficulty sleeping Feelings of irritation or anger Feelings of depression Lack of motivation Fear of competition Difficulty concentrating Increased sensitivity to emotional stress

*Adapted from The Physician and Sportsmedicine, June 2003

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