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Exercise & the Common Cold/Flu

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Scientists have yet to discover a cure for the common cold and flu. Despite the inferences from the drug companies whether you take medicine or not it still will take 10 days to two weeks for a common upper respiratory infection to run its course.

Virus or bacteria cause respiratory infections and flu. Going outside in the rain or cold weather does not cause respiratory infections. There is a greater likelihood of being exposed to infective agents staying indoors near individuals who are carrying a virus or bacteria than going outside in the rain. Breathing the same air and shaking hands with infected individuals spreads the virus.

Humans have a highly developed immune system, which produces substances in the body to kill harmful virus and bacteria. The immune system can be strengthened or weakened by diet, mental stress, and exercise.

Moderate amounts of regular exercise, such as, running stimulate favorable responses to the immune system and results in increased resistance to common colds and flu. A sedentary life style leads to an increased susceptibility to catching cold/flu. Excessive amounts of exercise increase susceptibility to catching cold/flu.

In a research investigation, 36 women who were not on an exercise program randomly were divided into exercise and non-exercise groups. For 15 weeks the exercise group took a brisk walk 45 minutes, 5 days per week. The women in the exercise group had half as many days of flu and colds compared with the non-exercise group.

In another study, 90% of the runners who were training a moderate amount reported a reduced number of cold and flu episodes during the previous 5 years. Seventy percent felt their risk of coming down with a cold or flu increased after intense marathon races. Similarly, an investigation of runners who had trained for the Los Angeles Marathon

determined the odds were 6 to 1 in favor of getting sick for the race participants vs. the non-participants.

Exactly, how exercise affects the immune system is not clear. One theory is that mild exercise increases body temperature to a level that creates an environment less favorable for growth of invading bacteria. Another possibility is exercise stimulates increased production of killer white blood cells, which destroy bacteria.

Competitive athletes do not have the option of training at a moderate level. Striving for a higher performance level requires greater training loads and increased risk of infection. The other environmental factors nutrition, and psychological stress need to be controlled. Eating a well-balanced diet and keeping other life stresses in check are advisable. Shun sick people before and after competitive events. Flu shots during the winter months are highly recommended.

What if the enviable happens and you come down with a common cold or flue. Do you train through it? My opinion, suffering a respiratory infection is often the first sign of over training. Therefore, it is most advisable to cut back on training and rest up. Starting at a higher body temperature increases the risk of heat illness and brain damage. Most all sportsmedicine experts advise if there is fever skip training.