

To Train or Not to Train: Training with Illness

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In my article '*Over-training – Causes, Recognition, and Prevention*', I discussed the delicate balance athletes must strike between pushing hard enough to achieve optimal fitness and avoiding the pitfalls of overtraining. A critical challenge during this process is that while athletes aim to reach a state of Overreaching, which is necessary for enhanced performance, their immune systems can become compromised, making them more susceptible to illness. So, what should an athlete do when illness strikes?

Training While Ill: Practical Guidelines

This article focuses on practical guidelines for training while ill, a topic of great importance, especially during high training volumes in the spring when fluctuating weather can lead to colds, sinus infections, and other illnesses. The key question athletes face is whether to continue training when they feel unwell.

Randy Wilbur's presentation at the OTC, as I referenced in my Over-training article, provided valuable insights. He recommended trying to avoid getting sick by following scientifically periodized training plans, maintaining detailed training logs, adhering to a strict nutrition plan, using therapeutic dose multi-vitamins, obtaining baseline data on biomarkers, improving recovery techniques, and following practical guidelines for training while ill. This article delves into that last recommendation.

The Impact of Illness on Training

When athletes become ill, it's crucial to assess whether it's safe to continue training. Systemic illness symptoms—such as fever, muscle aches, swollen lymph nodes, or extreme fatigue—indicate that exercise should be avoided. Conversely, if the illness is non-systemic, sub-maximal exercise might still be possible.

Dr. Mark Harris's article on *Infectious Disease in Athletes*, published in the ACSM Journal, provides further guidance. He explains that “moderately intense exercise,” defined as 5 to 60 minutes at 40-60% of maximum heart rate (MHR), can enhance immunity. However, “intense exercise,” which is 5 to 60 minutes at 70-80% of MHR, and prolonged exercise (over 60 minutes) can weaken the immune system.

Given that most of my athletes regularly engage in intense training, this immune system response is vital to consider. The risk of illness is higher during periods of intense training, which often leads athletes to wonder, “If I am ill, can I train? If so, how?”

The "Neck Check" and Returning to Exercise

A helpful guideline for deciding whether to train while ill is the “neck check.” If symptoms are above the neck—like a runny nose or sore throat—athletes can try light exercise for 10 minutes. If symptoms worsen, stop exercising. If symptoms don't worsen, continue at 50% of MHR for less than an hour. However, if symptoms are below the neck—such as fever, respiratory congestion, or body aches—exercise is not recommended.

At the first sign of illness, I advise my athletes to back off and consult their doctor if they have any doubts. Rest, hydrate, eat well, and take vitamins with extra antioxidants to fend off illness early. It's better to take a day or two off to prevent a cold from sidelining

you completely. Remember, pushing through an illness can lead to overtraining, which is far more detrimental.

Final Thoughts

I'm not a doctor, so I always recommend that my athletes consult their physician when they're ill and follow their advice. This article is intended to provide guidance, but your health should always come first. Get well, then get fit.