

Returning From INJURY

by Susie Power

It has been a few weeks since you last placed your feet in the runners and headed out the door for your regular exercise fix. It only seemed like yesterday when you were counting the number of running days in succession. But one missed training session led to two, then three, then a week. Now time has gone and you realise you better get running again, or it will be that much harder to get back into a regular training pattern.

IT happens to the majority of us. There are times when you are too busy, the weather is either too hot or constantly raining or an injury pops up and you have to take time away from your one love – running! There really isn't anything wrong with this and most times it works as a benefit; allowing the body and mind to recuperate. But for some reason, we convince ourselves that our whole world crashes down when we get an injury. These negative thoughts only work to hamper getting back on the road. So let's change the attitude to a positive one, and learn to understand how to get back into a routine successfully.

Returning from injury

While many elite athletes continue to put their bodies through the rigours of cross-training all day, everyday for the duration of their injury, most of us don't have the time to get to the pool, gym or cycle for the couple of hours required to compensate for our lack of runs. Personally I think runners are pretty lucky. Our activity is very convenient, simple and generally short in duration. This makes it easy to get up, out the door, back, shower and get to work at a reasonable time.

I first experienced an injury when I was 20-years-old, I was very eager to 'get back' and made the time to cross train. Although it was monotonous and expensive, I was able to successfully return to racing almost immediately. My cardiovascular fitness was still high, but my quick return to competition caused another injury within a few months. I had gone six weeks without any weight-bearing activity and my muscles, tendons and ligaments were not accustomed to the impact of running. I think many elite athletes panic when they have had so much time off running, and when they are 'allowed' to resume training, they think they

are okay to race almost immediately. My physiotherapist, Rob O'Donnell (Southern Suburbs Physiotherapy Centre, Melbourne), calls this "knock-on injuries" - doing too much too soon can lead to ongoing problems or new injuries. To avoid this happening we must take a more conservative approach to resuming training, rather than going straight into it.

As I got older and took on more commitments, I decided to no longer cross train throughout my injuries. Sure I gained a little weight due to the lack of cardio training, but I tried to work on exercises Rob had given me. I found I had to get back into it slower, but I came back stronger and gradually resumed my normal training.

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So how much conditioning do you lose when you have had a week, month or more off training and with no exercise? This is something all of us worry about. When you've been in training for weeks or months and you have to take a week off, thoughts of putting on weight and losing fitness tend to rush through the mind. There is no correct answer to this question but I've seen and experienced average figures of:

- 1-5 days off - losing up to 1% conditioning
- 1 week off - losing up to 10% conditioning
- 2 weeks off - losing up to 20% conditioning
- 4 weeks off - losing up to 40-50% conditioning
- 6 weeks off - losing up to 60-70% conditioning

So as you can see, you can go a week and lose very little fitness; you won't notice the difference. However, have a month off and you have to remember to return extremely slowly and understand it may take a little longer to get back to the level you were training at four weeks ago. Generally physiotherapists and doctors estimate one week off equates to two weeks gradual build up to get back to pre-injury level.

It is extremely important to get the advice and treatment from an experienced physiotherapist while injured, regardless of whether you have done some exercise or none at all. If you are responding to treatment and you have an under-

standing, 'running orientated' physiotherapist (such as Robbie!), you may resume your running before all your pain is completely gone. I have to admit, the times I have been out injured and was given the green light to go for a run, it felt like Christmas - it's a pretty exciting day!

Getting back into training

Coming back from a layoff isn't as hard as you may think. Ok, it may be physically and mentally harder than when you are 'on a roll' with a routine training program, but the body is an amazing machine and it does adapt - if treated correctly. Of course, you need patience. When you are given the go ahead to commence

Take a day off

- 3 minute run then walk for 3 minutes and repeat 5 times
 - 3 minute run then walk for 2 minutes and repeat 7 times
 - 3 minute run then walk for 1 minute and repeat 9 times
- Take a day off

Generally work on doing something similar for up to three days then include a rest day. You can increase your runs by one minute or so and gradually decrease your walking breaks until you can comfortably run continuously for 10 minutes, with a walk break of about 5 minutes. From this you can gradually build up into your continuous 20 minute run.

Getting back on the road after a week or so off due to work commitments or family responsibilities involves a similar, but less involved comeback program. Similarly, you will find your initial runs more stressful on the heart and lungs, but it will only take a couple of runs to be back to your normal training level. If your days off start to add up and you attempt to resume your pre-layoff training after a couple of weeks, you may want to ease back with some shorter, easier runs. Obviously it is always better to try and run regularly and not break a pattern or routine, but sometimes it has to be. Many of my best races have been run off having an enforced 4-5 day break in the week leading into competition. For some reason I come up trumps after a few days off. Although there was always the thought of losing fitness, I always reassured myself that I had done the training and the majority of past base work running is never lost.

So if you are one of these men or women who get busy at certain times of the year with family or work commitments, or are one to encounter an injury every season, remember you are not alone. Reassure yourself that it takes time to lose fitness and be patient enough to come back slowly, especially for the first couple of runs. Think positively and know that it's not the end of the world if you have to miss a day. Most of all, listen to your body – it will quietly talk to you!

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