

Overtraining Syndrome/Burnout

Burnout, or overtraining syndrome, is a condition in which an athlete experiences fatigue and declining performance in sport despite continuing or increased training. Overtraining can result in mood changes, decreased motivation, frequent injuries and even infections. Burnout is thought to be a result of the physical and emotional stress of training.

Overtraining syndrome happens when an athlete fails to recover adequately from training and competition. The symptoms are due to a combination of changes in hormones, suppression of the immune system (which decreases the athlete's ability to fight infection), physical fatigue and psychological changes. Risk factors include specializing in a single sport, sudden increases in training, participation in endurance sports, low self-esteem, and parental and coaching pressure to perform.

Warning Signs

Warning signs of burnout include:

- The young athlete is no longer enjoying playing the sport.
- The sport is dominating the family's life.
- The only topic of conversation is the child's sport.
- Rewards are based on performance in the sport.
- The young athlete has missed 10 percent of season, but has not seen a doctor.
- The female athlete is older than 16 and still not menstruating, or is dieting just to become a better athlete.

Symptoms

Symptoms of burnout include:

- Chronic muscle and joint pain
- Weight loss and loss of appetite
- Increased heart rate at rest
- Decreased sports performance
- Fatigue
- Prolonged recovery time
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Frequent illnesses
- Difficulty completing usual routines
- Decreased school performance
- Personality or mood changes
- Increased anger or irritability
- Sleep disturbances (difficulty sleeping or sleeping without feeling refreshed)

Diagnosis

There is no test for overtraining syndrome. The diagnosis is based on an athlete's history, the symptoms reported and the absence of an alternative explanation for these symptoms.

Treatment

The only treatment for burnout is rest. The athlete should stop participation in training/competition for a set period of time. That period of time will vary for the sport and particular athlete, but can range from four to 12 weeks. During the rest period, the athlete can participate in short intervals of low-intensity aerobic exercise to help keep active and fit; however, this type of activity should be unrelated to the specific sport. Return to sport can be done when the signs and symptoms of burnout have resolved completely (including physical symptoms, mood changes, sleep disturbances etc.).

Prevention

Making training fun and interesting – with age-appropriate games and workouts – can help prevent burnout. The training regimen should be flexible with planned breaks one to two days a week, and longer breaks every few months to allow for a complete recovery. Parents and coaches should provide a supportive environment, and teach the athlete to be aware of cues from his or her body that indicate a need to slow down or change the training routine.