

RUNNING WHEN SICK



Keeping to a running schedule is always hard, and even harder when you are feeling a little under the weather. With the onset of autumn people start to collect colds and sniffles like medals, and the age old question of whether to carry on running raises its head. How do you know when it is time to take it easy or rest? Here are some simple indicators to watch out for if you start to feel you are sick. Remember, colds and flu are often the body's reaction to being a little run down. Picking up a cold or any bug can knock you back for a few days, but if you rest and recover sensibly, full health and fitness will be regained more quickly.

Early Symptoms of Sickness

These can be similar to overtraining or just being a little stressed out! You feel tetchy, almost grumpy and little things upset you. Normal regular sleep patterns become irregular. You start sneezing or coughing and feel all choked. You desperately want to keep training. How do you know when to draw the line and decide – as with an injury – that to go out running will actually do more harm than good. You should never talk yourself out of training, but for the sake of your long-term health and well-being, be sensible and look at these pointers:

The Neck Test

Coaches and doctors have long advised runners feeling a little under par to give themselves the Neck Test. Cold-like symptoms above the neck – like runny or stuffy nose, sneezing etc. – may not be too bad, and short gentle running may actually help. More intense feelings below the neck – like feeling feverish with swollen glands or a hacking cough, unusually laboured breathing when climbing stairs or at rest, fever, fatigue, muscle aches, vomiting, even diarrhea, chills, are not good and any one of these may indicate a virus. To keep running even gently can exacerbate the problems, and also make recovery longer. This is a very simplistic test and if you are at all unsure about your symptoms or if they are progressive – i.e. getting worse – consult your doctor.

Temperature Guide

If your temperature is more than a degree above your normal level. The average normal body temperature taken in the mouth is 37°C (98.6°F), but does vary person to person. Anywhere between 36.5°C and 37.2°C (97.7°F and 99°F) may be normal. So if your temperature rises a degree above your normal and certainly above 99° be wary. Your body will be demanding more fluid than usual to help maintain a stable body temperature, so even moderate exercise will dehydrate you even more. Also you will just be putting more strain on your whole immune system at a time when rest is what is needed to build it up again.

Heart Rate Guide

A higher heart rate while resting indicates the body is under stress. You could just be slightly over-trained and need an extra recovery day, but if your resting heart rate is higher than normal accompanied by signs of cold or flu be wary! Normal heart rate varies along with many factors, such as age and general fitness. If you run or exercise regularly, it is important to know what your resting heart rate is. If, as all regular runners should, you keep a training diary, don't get obsessed by it, but every few days make a note of your resting heart rate in the morning. It will vary a little but if you are feeling a bit off colour accompanied by a higher heart and any cold/flu like symptoms, then assess what is going on and be prepared to rest for 24-48 hours until your temperature comes down. What should your resting heart rate be? That will vary from individual to individual depending on age and fitness, which is why it is important to have an idea of what your regular resting heart rate is on an ongoing basis.

When to Resume Training?

Only when you feel any flu-like symptoms and temperature and heart rate have returned to normal. Again this can vary from individual to individual. Returning to full training too soon or attempting a hard session or race before full recovery, can lead to a relapse. It is best to start off with an easy jog and – as after an injury – just build things up slowly. If you have an upcoming race, it may be fine to compete if recovery has gone well, but be prepared to re-adjust your original goals. Life and health are precious and there will always be other events to challenge you in the future.

Note

The well-meaning advice offered in this article is written from the perspective of a regular runner with over 30 years' experience. It should not be construed in any way as medical advice. If in any doubt about symptoms of illness or injury, always seek a professional opinion. In our collective experience, heeding professional advice will usually get you back running again much quicker.