



Colds, Flu, and Training

Intro

We have all been there. Training is going well. Goal race is on the horizon. You have managed to keep injuries at bay. While at work you get a little sore throat and a little muscle aching. You cough here and there, and the question starts, "Am I getting sick?" The next morning the question is answered with fevers, body aches, cough and a runny nose. Now what do you do?

Colds

The common cold can be caused by one of over two hundred known viruses. Escaping this is not likely, especially when in the middle of the season and intensive training is occurring which at times compromises our immune system's ability to fight off infectious intruders. Rhinovirus is the most common culprit causing the common cold. Generally, a cold involves the gradual onset of a clear runny nose, sinus congestion and drainage, sneezing and at times low grade fevers, sore throat and cough. The acute phase lasts usually 2-4 days, with the total illness typically lasting 5-10 days.

Flu

Acute Influenza (the flu) is sudden in its onset with many people knowing the hour they got sick. This is the "hit by a Mack truck" illness. High fevers, severe muscle aches, sore throat, cough, headache and nasal congestion are all part of this illness. The cause again is a virus - influenza virus types A and B. The acute phase lasts 4-5 days with a resultant cough and congestion lasting up to a couple of weeks and sometimes longer.

Training

The question is do you "train thru" the illness, lightly train or not train at all? There are two issues that will help decide this: lung involvement and fevers with body aches.

The lungs are the main way we get oxygen into our body for everyday functions and of course when we train. When the lungs are affected by illness the ability to clear secretions becomes compromised. The defenses to fight off further infections are significantly decreased as well. The general rule that applies here is if the illness is neck and above you're likely o.k. to train at an EZ or recovery pace. If the illness is below the neck then you really need to rest. Continuing to train with a significant cough or any wheezing will not only impair training but will likely prolong your cough and put you at risk of developing a complicating illness like pneumonia.

Fevers state that the infection is acute. The body is in a catabolic state fighting off infection. The muscles ache in part is due to muscle (protein) breakdown that is occurring. Usually weight loss that has occurred following a febrile (fever producing) illness, once re-hydrated, is due to lean body weight loss and not fat loss. Relative de-training is occurring during fevers even if at rest when recovery should be occurring. Effective training occurs when periods of muscle stress are followed by proper recovery so the muscle adapts and fitness improves. De-training occurs when muscles are stressed without recovery and breakdown occurs with loss of strength and stamina. If one trains during fevers – further muscle breakdown and de-training occurs. Many studies have shown that athletes after a significant febrile illness can take 2-4 weeks to regain the muscle fitness they had prior to the sickness.

How do we put this knowledge into useful guidelines? If you have an illness that is above the neck such as sore throat, sinus congestion or runny nose then training through the illness with easy to endurance aerobic pace workouts is appropriate. As you begin to feel better, then slowly ramping up the workouts is reasonable. Listening to your body is of paramount importance, and taking it easy and allowing recovery will ultimately speed up your return. Realize that full recovery may take 2-3 weeks. The situation for illnesses below the neck such as bronchitis, flu, significant cough, wheezing as well as fevers and significant body aches require more dramatic measures. Complete rest is indicated until all fevers, body aches, wheezing and severe cough have subsided. Only at that point can easy or endurance aerobic training begin. Recovery will be longer here. A rule of thumb to follow is that for every day off means three days of easy recovery training. So, if off 5 days then 15 days of recovery training is in order. The key point to remember is that you will feel sluggish, and to try and push through this kind of illness because of anxiety due to missed training will only lead to poor training, poor performance, prolonged recovery and a sense of failure.



From the Doctor.....

A Sports-medicine series by S7 Team Medical Advisor & USAT coach, Dr. John McMenemy.

Treatment

When, not if, you contract a cold there are some basic measures you can take. First the body does the biggest bulk of tissue healing during sleep. More than the usual sleep will be required if a quick recovery is desired. Fluids help run the metabolic machinery more efficiently and increased fluids are in order. Many athletes, due to not feeling well, will drink less, and this causes more fatigue and body aches. Tylenol can usually handle the body aches and sore throat but if particularly bothersome then ibuprofen can be helpful. Eating a well balanced diet always helps. For the congestion, guaifenesin (Mucinex, Robitussin) over the counter probably works the best and has the least effects on heart rate and blood pressure. If cough then try the above medicines with DM in the name, standing for dextromethorphan. If symptoms persist or you're not sure if your symptoms represent a cold then you should call your local physician. You should do light training only to maintain fitness, not to gain.

If you're unlucky enough to contract the flu, rest with cessation of training is indicated. You should drink a lot of fluids. Generally a trip to the doctor is in order. If the flu is suspected or if a rapid flu test is done and is positive then medication can be very helpful in decreasing the severity and length of the illness, especially if diagnosed and treated within the first 48 hours.

Prevention

The basic prevention measures have many of the basic treatment strategies. Frequent hand washing and staying away from crowds and known sick people are probably the biggest steps in preventing colds and flu. Flu vaccination is 70-90% effective in preventing flu. Sleep and proper training recovery are two important factors in decreasing illness risk. Sleep is when the body repairs damage that occurred during the day and builds up body's defenses. With many athletes, sleep is usually sacrificed for training as you try to cram 30 hours worth of stuff in a 24 hour period. Most studies indicate 7-8 hours of sleep each night is ideal, although this varies for individuals. Proper recovery workouts is very helpful in not only allowing for proper gains in fitness but also decreases the risk of injury as well as illness as the immune system also recovers during the recovery days. Eating a well balanced diet is helpful. If you're not sure how to do this would recommend seeking counseling from your coach or nutritionist to make sure at least the basic diet components are in place. Vitamins are not regulated by the FDA and so required studies to back-up most claims are not necessary when bringing these drugs to the market. Anecdotally, many endurance physicians recommend a daily multi-vitamin and 500mg of vitamin C. Vitamin D and calcium may also be recommended if you're a female endurance athlete. The doses of these supplements should be recommended by your physician.

Bottom line

Knowledge and common sense is going to determine how to approach your respiratory illness. Taking care of your sickness properly will allow quicker resolution of symptoms, less time away from training, and being able to race with minimal to no effect on your results. It's a matter of following the saying, "Take your medicine" referring that if you follow treatments properly and take the necessary rest, you will be back sooner to reach your goals rather than later.

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