

Exercise Should Not Cause Pain

The most important piece of advice coaches, trainers and physicians can give any athlete is simple; "stop any exercise or activity that causes pain." This important advice is often ignored, dismissed or modified by athletes and coaches alike. But the simple fact is that if athletes pay attention to the cues their body provides, they are more likely to avoid common sports injuries and maintain a safe and effective training routine. Unfortunately, many athletes miss or misinterpret the body's warning signals.

Discomfort vs. Pain

It's important for athletes to understand the difference between pain and discomfort when training. Coaches and trainers who fail to teach their athletes how to recognize the difference are not doing their most important job, which is to teach athletes how to train safely *and* get results.

What Is Pain?

Pain is the body's primary warning signal that alerts us to a problem. We need to listen and act on any feelings of pain. Exercise should not cause pain and if it does, you need to back off or stop the activity until the pain stops. This seems like common sense, but many athletes ignore pain, *work through* pain, justify pain and in some cases even train in pain. For an athlete, this is risky behavior. The odds of developing a serious or chronic injury increase as you exercise with pain.

What Is Discomfort?

Discomfort, on the other hand, is often a part of exercise training and can be an indication that your workouts are pushing you to improve your cardiovascular capacity and strength. The discomfort of muscle fatigue, for example, is common after lifting weights or after a hard run. Occasionally, an athlete will experience the discomfort of delayed onset muscle soreness which can occur one to two days after a new workout routine or a particularly intense session. This sort of discomfort, while not pleasant, is normal. Delayed muscle soreness should only last two or three days and is only felt in the muscles; not the joints or tendons.

Pain Is a Sports Injury Warning Sign

Any pain felt at the start of exercise should be a warning sign that something is wrong. If you have pain on one side of the body, if you have pain in a joint, or have a limited range of motion, you need to back off or stop that activity.

Safe Exercise Progression Tips

One guideline for exercise progression is to only increase your training intensity or duration as long as you are pain-free and have full range of motion without joint soreness. When it comes to exercise progression, it's helpful to follow the ten percent rule as a general guide. Simply stated, do not increase exercise time, distance or intensity more than ten percent per week. While not perfect for every athlete, this guideline may help athletes keep their training in line with the body's ability to progress.

Exercise and Pain - The Bottom Line

Exercise should not cause pain. If it does, you are either doing it incorrectly, you are not fully recovered from an injury or you may be on your way to developing a chronic injury. Smart athletes will learn to listen to the subtle, and not-so-subtle, warning signs the body provides and adjust their exercise to avoid pain and get great results.