



Nils Nilsson

EXERCISING WITH A CHRONIC DISEASE

BY JORDAN D. METZL, MD

Casey is a 25-year-old runner in my practice who came to see me because of her painful knees. She had iliotibial band syndrome, a common condition in runners training for marathons. Some exercises and eventually a shot of cortisone fixed her and she ran her first marathon with a smile.

The wrinkle in Casey's case is that she has cystic fibrosis. When other athletes finish the race, they can return to their daily lives, but her daily life entails dealing with the tremendous difficulties of having a chronic disease. For her, exercise is only part of the story. Daily medications, intravenous antibiotics and breathing treatments are as much a part of her routine as nutritional powders and bike tire selection are part of ours.

Before her first marathon she told me, "I'm so excited to do this marathon to raise awareness about CF. I want to be a positive role model for other people with this disease."

It's one thing to be a person with a chronic disease; it's another thing to be an athlete with a chronic disease. What is certain is that these athletes all display tremendous bravery. The things that many of us take for

granted, such as the ability to just get up and go, become ordeals for athletes who live with chronic diseases.

Thankfully, cystic fibrosis is a relatively rare disease, but at every race you see athletes who have to modify their lives due to chronic diseases. Adam is a runner with asthma and Melanie is a triathlete with diabetes.

Adam needs to bring his inhaler to every race and takes oral medicine to lessen the frequency of his asthma attacks. He never takes running for granted.

"I feel so lucky every time I run," he says. Adam has learned that keeping himself hydrated during races helps lessen the severity of his asthma, so he stays ahead of dehydration in his race plan.

Melanie has learned to better control her diabetes with triathlon. Her insulin requirement is much lower since she uses

exercise to help modify her blood sugar levels.

"I have found that my blood sugar levels are much better moderated with daily workouts," she told me. She makes sure that when she hits the run, she checks her sugar level every six miles so it doesn't drop too low.

Each of these athletes, and the many thousands who are like them, is a hero. Remember that every day athletes use exercise and sport not only to go faster but to manage chronic disease. Exercise won't make the disease go away, but it can ease the management of these illnesses.

At your next race, if you see someone using an inhaler or checking

his blood sugar before or during a race, give a shout-out. These are brave athletes. ▶

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