

Let's hear it for the first-timers

By Jordan D. Metzl, MD



You'll meet them this summer at the expo, on the road or at the finish line. You'll recognize them by the combination of wild-eyed

enthusiasm, a sense of pride that is brimming over the top like an espresso in Seattle. You'll know them by their cool gear, excited chatter and group behavior.

They are the first timers. And we all should be proud of them.

Julie, a 36-year-old fashion designer who overcame a heat illness to finish her race. Robert, a 55-year-old lawyer who battled with weight problems his whole life, took on a new challenge so his kids would be proud of him, and finished a sprint triathlon with his whole family watching. And Mary, a 35-year-old teacher who, when she started, kept battling injury, fatigue and fear of failure, is now a devoted half-Ironman finisher.

What do we know about all these first timers?

They come from all walks of life, but many are professionals looking to build discipline and a regular routine of exercise in their lives. Some have signed up through charity groups, meeting new friends along the way. All are amazed at the spectacle of triathlon, the rush of the swimming tide of arms and legs at the start of the race and the joy of crossing the line at the end.

And what about health issues for first timers?

Overall, first-time triathletes and runners tend to have higher injury rates than those who have been at it for a while. First timers are more likely to develop stress fractures, tendonitis and shin splints. Sometimes the first-timer body isn't quite adjusted to the rigors of endurance sport and breaks down. This often happens because he or she isn't yet trained to listen to his or her body's cues of pain.

First timers are also more likely to devel-



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op nutrition problems, mostly through a lack of knowledge. Dehydration, heat illness and hyponatremia (low sodium) are all more common among first timers. This often results from not drinking enough fluid or, sometimes, from not drinking the correct kinds of fluid, which throws off the body's hydration or electrolyte concentration. Again, learning what to drink, when to drink and how to drink can make a tremendous difference, as can learning whether solids are something that a particular person can tolerate during a race.

The greatest thing about being a first timer is that it's a huge first step toward a lifetime of activity. Activity is the cheapest and most effective way to enhance your overall health and well being. We know that people who commit to regular health-and-fitness programs, of any type, tend to have longer, healthier and happier lives than their inactive counterparts. This includes a lower incidence of heart disease and a more positive outlook. What's more, by starting people in activity programs who might not otherwise participate in sport, we are helping to reduce health spending in the future.

However, education for the first-timer group is key. They need knowledge, not only on how to transition, but on how to eat. Not only on correct swimming strokes but on how to recognize when a shoulder injury from swimming needs to be evaluated. Knowledge

is power, and this group needs lots of it.

And who can help? We, the veterans, who have committed almost every offense and learned the hard way, should readily share our expertise. We, who have injured ourselves from not listening, can teach our new friends.

And how do we do this? Reach out. If you spy a new group of triathletes, take time to say hello. Speak to them at the pool, see how they are doing on training rides. If there is a chance to speak or lecture to a group of newbies, or to participate in their program, go ahead and see if you can help. The knowledge of experience is substantial.

And on race day? Take time to say congratulations. Even if it's only another race for you, remember that getting to the finish line is the most amazing thing for all first timers. With more racers come more races and more opportunities for everyone.

Wherever you are, our new triathletes, we are all very proud of you. Keep up the goal setting, the smiles and the enthusiasm. Next year, you will have lots to teach the new crowd. S

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