

Post Race Recovery: Common Questions, Sensible Answers

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I am writing this column after spending the day hobbling around my office having run the New York Marathon yesterday. As I walk slowly between patient exam rooms, hobbling with a smile, I'm struck by the many questions that come up about post race recovery. Rather than use my usual column format, I thought I'd address some of these questions sequentially.

1) How long does post race recovery last?

The truth is that the longer the race, and the closer and more time you spend near your "red line", the longer the post race recovery. There are stages of post race recovery, the immediate stage lasting the first 12-24 hours, the first few days of recovery, and the one to two weeks of post race recovery. There are also many factors that can influence post race recovery such as age, nutrition, sleep, diet, and general healing rate. All of these issues can come into play, so the best advice here is to eat well, sleep as much as possible, stay hydrated, try to stay protein heavy and antioxidant rich in your diet, and don't rush back too soon.

2) Do I really need to get into that ice bath?

For myself and all the George Castanza fans out there, I wish the answer was no. But, several studies have looked at muscle recovery post event and the truth is that spending at least five minutes in an ice bath does seem to help reduce muscle injury and expedite muscle healing. This is especially true with greater amounts of muscle load, so the tougher the event, the more you need to try and suck it up and get into the tub.

3) What do I do the night the event is over?

Of course, this is the time to celebrate. The major event is over, the war stories have started, it's time to enjoy yourself. But what actually aids healing? The data on protein ingestion post event is quite convincing, so for sure a good dose of your favorite protein, be it tofu in California, steak in Nebraska, or sushi in New York, is in order. Although there can be a desire to drown sorrows in alcohol, this is actually a bad idea since this tends to worsen dehydration symptoms post event. If you are compelled to drink alcohol, make sure it's after a solid few hours of post race rehydration.

4) What if my pee is brown?

When it comes to urine, dark color means trouble. We're seeing more cases of rhabdomyolysis, injury to muscle that is so severe that muscle protein can't be fully filtered by the kidneys, turning the urine brown. My column last year on DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness) addressed this somewhat, but the key here is to make sure that dark colored urine is discussed immediately with your physician. In severe cases, rhabdomyolysis can permanently injure kidneys, so this isn't something to mess with at

all. Prevention through good pre, inter, and post race hydration is the key here, so make sure you're on top of your hydration.

5) Am I likely to get sick?

You might have never heard of them, but interleukins are hormones that circulate in your body and direct traffic. The white blood cells are the body's defense fighting agents, but they need to know where to go. That's where interleukins come into play, they direct the WBC's on where to go to fight infection. Many studies have looked at interleukin levels post endurance event and they seem to drop 36-72 hours post race. Again, the longer and harder the effort, the bigger the drop with the interleukin levels. The key here is to anticipate this drop and protect yourself post race. Try to stay away from the sneezing and coughing guy next to you, wash your hands regularly, and try to limit plane travel for a few days after the race if possible. Although the data is mixed on Vitamin C, zinc, or echinacea loading, it can't hurt to try one of these if you believe in that sort of thing. Expect to feel sniffly a few days after a marathon, it's normal for most.

6) When can I exercise again?

Of course, we all want to move again. But rushing back too soon can spell disaster for many athletes who develop tendon injuries and stress fractures from rushing back too quickly. There are several key points here. Firstly, the longer and harder the event, the more time it takes to heal. Secondly, the better shape you are in going into the event, the quicker the recovery period. Thirdly, the better job you do in not rushing back, the smoother the transition back to activity. With these bits of information, it's important to remember that everyone heals at a different rate. In the words of Obe Won Kanobe, "feel the force, listen to your body". I tell my patients to mimic the taper they did going into the event with the post race return to activity after the event. In essence, walking back up the ladder in reverse is the way to go. But there is no one size fits all, so just listen to your body and go back very slowly.

7) What can I do better next time?

We all hope to learn from our successes and mistakes. See what works for you. I have tried to give you the scientific facts here, but the truth is that everyone is different and you need to listen to your own body's needs in order to ensure a healthy post race recovery. Lastly, please treat the post race period seriously because it can influence your next race and many races after that. Here's to the many races to come!

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