



## Listen up

*Pay attention to your body (and doc) when cold and flu season strikes*

By Jordan D. Metzl, MD

**A**s winter draws near, the joys and successes of the past season of triathlon fall behind, and the excitement of next year's races is on the horizon. But with winter also comes cold and flu season.

A common scenario on my triathlon team plays out as follows: "Hey Doc, I feel sick. I've got a low fever, and I'm coughing up green stuff. Should I run today?"

This is always a tough one for me to answer. My typical approach, for myself that is, has always been: If I can make my body do it, I do it. Meaning it is rare for me to take a day off. My body, like many of yours, craves exercise. Even when I'm ill, even when I feel nasty, a little shot of endorphins can help get me through the day.

The body is an amazing machine . . . even cooler than my awesome tri bike. The basic infection-fighting cells are called white blood cells (WBCs), and these are directed by a whole host of other elements that actually tell the WBCs where to go and what to do. One of the main factors directing white blood cell function, called interleukin 1, has actually been shown to drop for the 48- to 96-hour period after an intense event. This is why so many athletes get colds two to five days after a race.

However, when it comes to the medical recommendations, there is quite a bit more to say. In general, when body temperature climbs over 101 (from a baseline average of 98.6), the risk of overheating during a workout can become more significant. Furthermore, some medical specialists think that exercising with a fever can actually diminish the body's ability to fight infection (although I have never read any studies to confirm this). That said, there are, undoubtedly, times when exercising while ill just isn't a good idea—particularly if you are in a spin class or other indoor setting where your germs can easily spread.

Since most wintertime infections, including colds and flu, are caused by viruses, antibiotic treatment (which treats bacteria) is ineffective at reducing the duration of either

symptoms or infectivity. What that means is you need to be kind to your neighbors: If you are infectious, stay out of the gym and work out at home. Most viral infections are spread by respiratory droplets; so, a small spin room, pool or gym, like an airplane, is a great place to spread germs.

### Seriously now

A mention should be made here of some symptoms that require medical attention. Fevers over 102, symptoms lasting more than



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four days, chest pain and shortness of breath are all very good reasons to see your primary doc without delay. Furthermore, if you do have a race planned and you fall ill, note that colds, fever and flu symptoms can significantly reduce your cardiac output, and this too can be a problem.

For treatment, it really depends on the cause of the sickness. Fever control and symptomatic care is the way to go for most viral infections (plus some of your mom's chicken soup). ▲

### TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Be respectful of being sick. The Jordan Metz approach has always been to do what you can, but other docs might not feel that way, so pay close attention to yours and listen to your body. If it's saying "No way," then heed the warning signs and do not push your luck or you may end up complicating the illness or having to take additional downtime due to a lingering virus.
- Make sure you learn to recognize when to seek medical attention, and please be respectful of your fellow athletes during the indoor-exercise season.



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