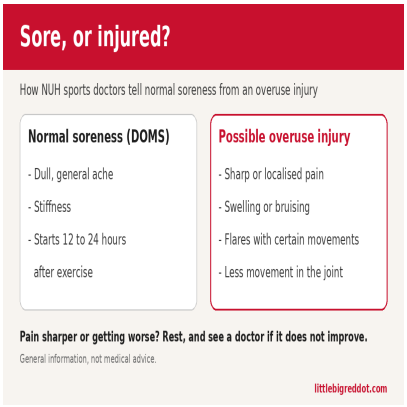


Sore or injured? NUH on the signs of overexercising, and when muscle pain turns dangerous

Description

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Nearly half of the sports injuries treated at the National University Hospital (NUH) Sports Centre between 2019 and 2021 were linked to overuse. Training too hard, too fast can end in pain, injury or, in rare cases, organ damage, whether you are building up for a marathon, a Hyrox race or a run of spin classes.

The useful skill is telling ordinary soreness apart from the start of an injury.

Normal soreness feels dull and general

Some stiffness after a hard or new workout is normal. Delayed onset muscle soreness, or DOMS, comes from microscopic tears in the muscle fibres. It brings inflammation and a general ache, and it usually starts 12 to 24 hours after exercise.

An overuse injury feels different. Dr Jade Chee, an associate consultant in the Division of Sports, Shoulder and Elbow Surgery at NUH, describes it as pain that is sharp or localised, sometimes with swelling or bruising. It tends to flare with particular movements and can reduce how far a joint will move.

The NUH advice is simple. If pain is sharper than usual, gets worse instead of better, or limits how much you can move, rest. If it does not improve, see a doctor.

When soreness turns dangerous

Pushing far past your limits can, in more serious cases, lead to rhabdomyolysis. This is a rare but potentially life-threatening condition in which damaged muscle releases harmful proteins into the bloodstream, and those proteins can damage the kidneys and the heart.

Singapore General Hospital lists severe muscle aches, weakness or swelling in the affected muscles, and red or brown urine as common symptoms. If you have these after hard exercise, go to A&E straight away, or call 995 if the person is very unwell.

NUH lists the groups most at risk of overexercising:

- elite athletes, and beginners in endurance sports, who ignore early warning signs and mistake fatigue for weakness
- people with eating disorders or muscle dysmorphia, an unhealthy obsession with body image
- people with inherited muscle diseases or metabolic disorders, who may be predisposed to rhabdomyolysis and should be told when to seek medical attention promptly
- younger gym-goers, who may be prone to exercise addiction because of pressure around body image and social media

High-intensity interval training and spin classes carry extra risk when they are done too often or without proper rest.

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The signs you are doing too much

Watch for persistent fatigue, slower performance, trouble sleeping and mood changes. Physical warning signs include tendonitis, ligament sprains and repetitive stress injuries, especially in the shoulders, knees or lower back.

Build up slowly

The way to avoid all of this is structured, progressive training. Preparing for a marathon should take at least six months to a year of consistent running. Build up until 15km to 20km a week feels comfortable before you try longer distances.

NUHâ??s checklist for training smarter:

- learn your limits and the signs of overtraining
- schedule at least one full rest day each week
- mix in low-impact activities such as swimming and yoga
- raise the intensity and length of your sessions gradually
- manage stress, sleep enough, eat a balanced diet and stay hydrated

Dr Chee puts rest and recovery first, with attention to nutrition, hydration and mental wellbeing, and suggests a coach or trainer can help you put together a safe plan.

This article is general information, not medical advice. If you are unsure about pain or an injury, see your own doctor.

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