

Returning to running after an injury...

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Just when you think everything is going as planned, it strikes – whether you are training for your first 5K or a Marathon, an injury can sideline or completely derail your fitness goals. After being diagnosed with a fibula stress fracture and ruptured ligament in my ankle six weeks out from my third marathon in 18 months (mistake number one) last August, my only option was to shut it down entirely. As a runner, it is one of the most dreaded injuries, since running is not part of the rehabilitation equation, at least, not for a long time, and the risk for re-injury is significant if you come back too soon. 80% of running injuries are caused by too much increase in mileage. The signs were there prior to the injury, but hindsight is 20/20, and I had never been injured in my five years running, what could possible go wrong? The magic question from the point of any injury – when can I get back to running again? Recovery begins at the point of diagnosis. Rest is key in any injury recovery, but maintaining any level of fitness was important not only to my mental psyche, but my physical well-being.

A number of key factors are important in any return to running after injury:

1. The most important thing I learned from my injury was that recovery takes a village and only time will heal. My doctors, physical therapists, personal trainer Matt Cali, gym members and staff at Fitness Concepts Health Club, family, friends, therapist, online running communities, and local runners and running organizations including G-Vegas Striders and the North Country Quad Series crew, all played a key role in supporting and encouraging me to stay motivated during my recovery and not just give up on running again. Don't do it alone, welcome the support of others! Yes, I had meltdowns, and I was devastated by the injury, but we only get one body during this life, and we must take care of it so we can enjoy the things we love.
2. LISTEN to everything your doctors tell you! In particular, with stress fractures, this is not an injury you can just “push” through. Rest, and only rest will help you recover and heal. Once you are cleared to begin physical therapy, if necessary, follow the recommendations, and resist the urge to push yourself beyond your therapy plan. Patience is a virtue!
3. Don't throw in the towel completely when it comes to maintaining your fitness routine – although my legs were off limits completely (no running or biking for 8 weeks, then only biking for another 6 weeks before any running was permitted), my upper body worked out like it had never worked before. I continued to go to the gym at the same frequency as before my injury, but with the help of a personal trainer, I learned new ways to not only build strength in my upper body, but work some cardio in with the use of bully ropes, and yes, I couldn't wait to get back to running or biking for cardio after that workout!
4. Race registrations wasted? Not necessarily! Many running organizations will allow you to “transfer” your registration to another runner. If you love the running community – volunteer your time at the races and know you will be back out there soon enough. My

husband was grateful for all the extra racing he got to do this past Fall too and I was his biggest fan!

5. Take a nutrition inventory – determine if you are getting enough Calcium and Vitamin D in your diet. Check out Nancy Clark’s Sports Nutrition Guidebook for a comprehensive look at improving your diet to not only recover from injury, but prevent them to begin with.
6. Sleep – yes, sleep can not only help you recover from an injury, but prevent one as well. A recent study published in the Journal of Pediatric Orthopaedics showed lack of proper sleep as a predictor for injury.
7. Consider your shoes? Anytime a runner experiences a new ache or pain, they should question their shoes. How many miles do you have on your shoes? Shoes need to be replaced every 300-500 miles depending on the type of shoe – minimalist more frequently. If you have never been fitted for shoes, consider visiting a shoe store that will analyze your gait and your arch to put you in the best shoe – Marx Running and Fitness Center in Acton or Sneakerama in Shrewsbury have always taken care of me. My shoes showed wear indications related to my injury. Also consider rotating shoes during training – wear different shoes throughout your training and consider a maximalist shoe such as the Hoka One for the ultimate support in returning from an injury.
8. Learn to stretch – yes, it takes time, but worth the time if the alternative is months without running due to an injury, and it is necessary to your recovery and further prevention of injury. 5-10 minutes of stretching before and after can mean the difference between a successful workout and an injury. Active.com offers great resources for runners learning to stretch properly. <http://www.active.com/running/articles/5-key-stretches-for-runners>
9. Ease back into running – remember what you may have considered easy before, may still be too much when you first hit the pavement again. Running/walking programs may be your best bet. Depending how long you are sidelined, you may be starting from scratch – 12 weeks no running at all, and a couch to 5k plan has been a model for easing back into running.
10. Be realistic, recovery takes time and despite what you may think, time is on your side. There will always be races to look forward to, but only if you take the time to fully recover.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that the signs were there, but I failed to take more serious notice, and although hindsight is 20/20, I’ve learned a great deal about what to look for in the future to prevent an injury. For females in particular, a missed period should be a screaming red flag that something is amiss. I missed my first period since being pregnant five years earlier in July (just one month prior to injury) but did not connect the dots. I was running more and faster than I ever had before. Amenorrhea in females is a major risk factor for stress fractures, and although I thought my diet was sufficient, consuming over 3,500 calories on high mileage training days, a review of my intake may have been the culprit – I needed to eat more to fuel my body for the work being done! Women are also at particular risk for osteoporosis, I began taking a Calcium supplement post injury to ensure I get 100% of my daily calcium. Consuming calcium through the foods we eat is ideal, but the supplement gives me added assurance I am

getting what I need. My calves were tight all summer, I brushed it off, but I am guilty of never stretching before running. The tightness in my calves were a red flag about the stress on my lower legs, and in some instances the tightening of muscles and ligaments actually causes the fracture, by pulling away from the bone. I was in my peak mileage week (50+ miles) and a 10-mile jump from the previous week and 3 races already in three weeks. I always struggle to run “easy” as indicated by my training plan, every run out I wanted to do faster! This is the biggest mistake runners make – your muscles need time to recovery and “slow easy” runs perform that task. Now, I set the treadmill to the slow pace so I don’t get tempted to run faster! No variation in my training – run, run, run – intervals, tempo runs, hill training etc. Now, biking and cross training are and will continue to be a major part of my training routine. Finally, I should have gone shopping, magic to any woman’s ears – the wear on my shoes, the obvious sign that they likely played a part in the injury. I never expected what was a burning pain in the side of my leg would end up being a stress fracture, so much so, I continued to run on it for a week past the initial injury – I bought new shoes, bought compression socks, slowed down my pace, but nothing was going to get me back running again till I visited the doctor and took the time to heal. Pay attention to your body, it speaks to you every day, we just have to learn to notice and listen.