**Matthew Axtman, DO**
**Corewell Health Orthopedics**

# Give it a Rest

Getting into a workout routine is one of the best things you can do for yourself and your body. We all know that exercise improves your mood, physical conditioning and overall health. Being consistent with your training schedule and monitoring improvements in your distance and speed will help you reach your goals. And while it feels great to exercise every day, doing so may hinder your ability to reach peak performance. It is a difficult concept, but you need to incorporate a day of rest from exercise at least once per week.

There are many athletes who say, "I have to exercise every day," both for the physical and psychological benefits. This is a false statement. The opposite is actually true. When it comes to exercise, the science is tried and true and has been extensively researched over many decades.

It is important to understand what a rest and recovery day looks like. You should not be doing any exercise that you normally engage in. If you are running, you should not run. If you are walking for longer distances and faster speeds, you should not walk.

Before you start to think that the concept of a rest day is crazy and completely tune me out, you need to understand its importance. A rest day allows healing, rebuilding, strengthening and conditioning of multiple body structures. The first and most important structure is your muscles. Exercise causes microscopic tears in the muscle. Yes, you read that correctly. When you exercise you are actually damaging your muscle tissue. Your body's response to this damage is to heal the muscle, increase the bulk of the muscle, and improve the strength and function of the muscle. By incorporating a rest day, you optimize the body's healing response, which will improve your performance and muscle structure and, most importantly, make you a better athlete. A rest day will also help decrease overuse syndromes, muscle strains and tendinitis.

Rest is also vital for your bone health. Very similar to muscle damage through exercise, your bones undergo stressors at a cellular level that cause microscopic stress reactions. In turn, these stress reactions cause the body to create new bone and improve bone health and strength. By improving the strength of the bone, you decrease the risk of injury and stress reactions or stress fractures that may sideline your training.

Exercising without rest days also can alter hormones and chemicals in your body. While you may think you feel moody and irritable if you miss an exercise day, the opposite is actually true. Having high levels of certain hormones and chemicals that increase with exercise can lead to irritability, mood swings, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, and fatigue if these levels are not normalized with a rest day. A recovery day can also decrease exercise fatigue and burnout.

So how do you avoid your typical exercise routine and incorporate rest into your training? This doesn't mean that runners should bike for 30 miles on a rest day, for example. Cross training is important, but a rest day is not a day to cross train because that will still put stress on your muscles and bones and will not allow the tissue to heal. Even if you are a walker, if you don't take a day off you are still putting stressors on your muscles and bones and not

allowing for healing to occur. If you absolutely can't sit still, light activity that does not engage the muscles, joints and bones too much is okay. For example, a stretching or yoga program will still allow for healing of your body.

If you find yourself lacking the motivation for exercise or dealing with injuries or decreased performance, first look at your training program and make sure you incorporate a rest day. This may be the simple answer to aches, pains and a lack of progress. Don't feel guilty for taking a day off because in the long run it will improve your conditioning, strength and performance. Even the most elite athletes do it.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Medical Group Orthopedics at (616) 267-8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our website.