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Pace yourself with the wellness message of National Physiotherapy Month! Running tips from Canadian Physiotherapy Association

The running season is finally here and both avid and recreational runners are looking forward to lacing up their running shoes and taking that first step outside in the spring weather. Running is an activity that many enjoy and can be extremely beneficial to one's health. A 30 to 40 minute run, three or four times a week can help to maintain flexibility, increase mobility and build strength and endurance. It can also help decrease the risk of heart disease, decrease stress and assist in maintaining weight and/or preventing obesity.

"It's more important and easier to prevent obesity, than to treat obesity, remarks Chris Bisignano, physiotherapist at Concourse Sports/Ergonomic Physiotherapy, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. "Like bad posture, inactivity and bad snacking are just habits. We must incorporate regular exercise into our weekly routines in order to prevent the diseases linked to obesity; heart disease and diabetes are examples. Whether you like to run, or simply want to "power walk" these activities have become increasingly popular as exercise options. Running, with the proper instruction, clothing and preparation can be performed just about anywhere, and compared to many organized sports it is extremely affordable. As we age, mobility is key to cardiovascular and musculoskeletal health."

However, like any strenuous athletic endeavor, running risks the possibility of injury. Injuries associated with running typically involve overuse; the same body parts are used over and over in the same motion until the repetition breaks down a weak point, and an injury occurs.

The following five S.M.A.R.T. tips, recommended by the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, will help to minimize overuse injuries. S.M.A.R.T. is an acronym for Stretch, Move, Add it up, Reduce strain, Talk to a physiotherapist

STRETCH - before and after your run, perform specific stretching exercises. Runners should concentrate on stretching the calf, hamstring, quadriceps, iliotibial band, groin, buttocks, outside of the knee and back. With each exercise, hold the stretch for at least 15 seconds, until you feel tension but not pain, and do not bounce. Visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association web site to download the Stretching Primer www.physiotherapy.ca/pdfs/StretchingPrimer.pdf

MOVE TODAY FOR TOMORROW – Running is a great activity to get your whole body in motion. Proper posture and body mechanics will help lessen the strain on your body.

- Before starting your run, relax and take a deep breath. This allows the lungs to move into an efficient position and the hips to pull forward, for an easier run. After exhaling, try to maintain your chest in this alignment.
- Your head, shoulders and hips must all be lined up over your feet to allow you to move forward as a unit with as little effort as possible. Always keep your body perpendicular to the ground.
- Look straight ahead and run in a straight line. Swing your arms naturally.
- Good running posture will allow your feet to run almost automatically, with a quick, gentle push. The push off should always be forward and not upwards.
- A smooth stride will reduce effort and therefore increase efficiency. Increasing the frequency of your stride and keeping the feet lower to the ground will allow your muscles to stay relaxed.

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ADD IT UP – Your progress in mileage and speed should be a gradual one. An unrelenting increase in mileage from one week to the next will ultimately result in a breakdown. It is important to keep in mind the principle of hard days and easy days being interspersed and also hard and easy weeks. Mileage should usually only be increased approximately 10 per cent per week. One or two days a week, at least, should be devoted to rest or non-running activities.

REDUCE STRAIN - Because of the repetitive nature and impact running has on your body, runners tend to be more susceptible to injuries.

- Avoid running on hard surfaces. Dirt paths are better than asphalt and asphalt is better than concrete. Grassy areas may look inviting but they may hide holes, rocks, and other potential hazards;
- Rotate your activities (running, cycling, swimming, etc.) to reduce strain and keep it interesting;
- Drink lots of fluids and be careful of overheating or dehydrating during activity;
- Don't overdo it – proper rest is essential; listen to your body and watch for recurring or persisting pain – if concerned, seek early professional attention from a physiotherapist.

TALK TO A PHYSIOTHERAPIST – Physiotherapists are the mobility experts for both the fit person who requires specific fitness and injury prevention advice, and for the elderly, injured or disabled person who has specific needs and considerations. With their applied knowledge and understanding of the human body in action, physiotherapists are able to help you to increase mobility, relieve pain, build strength and improve balance and cardiovascular function. A physiotherapist will assess your injury and provide appropriate treatment that will promote an earlier return to your golf game as well as advice on how to prevent recurrence of injury.

For more information on running, visit the 'Running Tips' page found on the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's web site www.physiotherapy.ca/NPM2004runningtips.htm

Since 1984, physiotherapists from across the country have designated time each year to promote physiotherapy in Canada. This united voice brings power to the NPM message and focuses attention on the value of physiotherapy in Canadian Healthcare.

National Physiotherapy Month runs from April 23 to May 23, 2005. For more information about injury prevention, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's web site www.physiotherapy.ca, where you can find more information on running, along with the three other accompanying NPM themes – gardening, walking and golfing.

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