

Ensure risks don't outweigh benefits of regular exercise

Getting regular exercise, whether going to a fitness center, biking to work, or heading out on an afternoon hike, brings with it a long list of health benefits. In exchange for those benefits you assume some risk for the occasional twisted ankle, sore joints or strained muscles. Proper training, warm-up and cool-down routines, hydration and using the right gear can help reduce these risks and keep your body in good health.

When you go beyond regular exercise and into sport, you put your body through a more intense physical test and increase your risk of injury. Competitive sports have an even greater intensity and many also include physical contact with other players. Clear safety protocols should be in place to help limit the risk of serious injuries while maximizing the reward of healthy competition, and individuals should only participate to the limit of their fitness and comfort level.

Competitive Fitness is a relatively new addition to the world of sport. For example, CrossFit is a popular, non-specialized intense training made up of a series of powerful exercises, with the individual trying to complete each set of exercise faster than the last. It is important to recognize that this kind of intensity requires proper form and a high level of fitness to avoid potentially serious injuries. Recent research has shown that this kind of intense training has a high injury rate, even for those in good shape, compared to many other types of lower-intensity exercise.

Another example is the growing trend of group fitness competitions or races, like Tough Mudder and Warrior Dash, that seek to inspire a higher level of fitness and challenge each athlete to perform at their personal best. These obstacle courses are designed to push the limits of fitness, endurance, strength and mental toughness, designed with an emphasis on the extreme. One of the unfortunate byproducts of these events is a backlog of injuries at the emergency departments of local hospitals. Participants can suffer from a range of injuries including heat exhaustion, severe sprains or broken limbs, to name a few. Though rare, several participants have died or have been paralyzed since 2011.

While participants voluntarily enter these competitions, they have little control over the obstacles designed to push the limits of their abilities. While health officials remain supportive of personal fitness and the health benefits it brings, there is an issue of accountability when it comes to extreme fitness competitions. As with any sport, the organizers have a responsibility to minimize the impact of injury to both individuals and communities, because our health resources are limited and are there to serve everyone. Meanwhile, participants should be aware that even a high level of fitness and ability may not protect them from injury due to the extreme nature of these events.

For more information on how you can be physically active while also protecting yourself from serious injury, visit simcoemuskohealth.org or call Your Health Connection at 1-877-721-7520 and speak with a public health nurse.

By Dr. Charles Gardner