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Preparation will make recovery easier for marathon runners

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By Body and Mind staff
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JENNY KANE, The Patriot-News, 2010

Once runners cross the finish line of the Harrisburg Marathon, it might be tempting to sit down. Experts say that it's important to keep moving and cool down slowly.

Training for a marathon is no easy task. Most people spend months — even years — conditioning their body to withstand a 26.2-mile run. But the end of a race may mark one of the most significant times for a runner: recovery. According to veteran runners, taking care of yourself after a marathon is crucial to keeping you healthy and ready to take on more miles in the future.

Take the time to train

For Dr. Richard Rayner, co-owner of Aspire Urgent Care and Family Medicine in Lower Paxton Twp., a good recovery starts well before the race.

"The best way to take care of yourself after a marathon is to take care of yourself before a marathon," he said. "Make sure you've put in the time to get your body prepared for what is a very difficult thing." Rayner will tackle his third **marathon today** at the 2011 Harrisburg Marathon and Relay, sponsored this year by Aspire.

Since preparing for a **marathon** doesn't happen overnight, finding others to train with can keep you on track. Rayner helped form Team Aspire, a group of runners of various levels. "We believe that exercise is done better in a community," he said.

Like Team Aspire, the **Harrisburg Area Road Runners Club** also offers an encouraging environment for runners. Fairview Twp. resident Mary Lou Harris, 64, a HARRC member for about 15 years, takes advantage of the weekly club runs to help her stick to training. Anyone, regardless of membership or ability level, can join these groups.

Keep yourself fueled

Eating a diet of healthy, high-nutrition food — before, during and just after the marathon — is also crucial to a good recovery. While drinking enough water is important, every 45 minutes to an hour marathon runners should also consume carbohydrates, and, about an hour after the race, eat some protein.

"Gatorade and other sports nutrition drinks are also wise to take in, because of the electrolytes —

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sodium, potassium,” Rayner said. These electrolytes also come in bar or gel form — something Swatara Twp. resident Jen Cadenhead, 33, prefers during the race, since they’re portable and easy to digest.

Every runner is different and should find the foods that work for him or her. “One thing I do within 15 to 20 minutes after finishing a marathon is drink some chocolate milk,” said Harris, who has completed about 15 marathons, including the Boston Marathon. “For me, it’s a very simple recovery drink.” She’ll also have a plain bagel — something “neutral,” she said — within an hour of finishing.

Cadenhead, who has run more than a dozen marathons in her career, snacks on fruit and an energy bar before eating foods such as chicken or pasta later in the day.

Stay on your feet

While a chair might look comfy after being on your feet for more than 26 miles, experts say that sitting down could be the worst thing you could do after running a marathon. According to Rayner, “you want your muscles to cool down, because if you just sit or lie down, there’s a good chance you’re going to cramp up.”

Instead, take a walk and stretch your muscles gently to keep them from contracting and causing pain. For Harris, compression socks aid the blood flow in her legs — especially when she travels to a marathon. “If I’m going to be sitting in a car or on a plane, I’ll make sure that I have them,” she said. If you’re traveling, make extra stops to allow yourself to walk around and stretch.

Cool down — literally

To further help your muscles relax, some runners subscribe to the idea of ice baths to speed the recovery process. Rayner suggests filling a garbage can or tub with cold water, adding ice, and soaking your legs for 10 to 15 minutes.

Massages may be beneficial as well, although most runners schedule one at least 24 hours later, unless they experience an injury. Since she hasn’t had issues, Harris often waits a day or two after the marathon if she gets a massage. However, “I think especially if a runner has had muscles tighten up or some difficulty during the race, massage therapists really know what they’re doing,” she said.

Allow your body to recuperate

While an elite runner may be ready to hit the pavement the day after a marathon, most won’t even want to look at their running shoes — and that’s just fine. A few days off won’t throw off your training, and may even be beneficial. While you’re unlikely to injure yourself, Rayner said, your body will most likely hurt.

“Listen to your body,” Harris said. “Let it rest, but at the same time, keep the movement there so that your muscles don’t tighten up.” For her, keeping herself in motion the next day, usually by going on a short walk, is key. “The day after, it’s torture,” Cadenhead said. “But I’m usually back out running by the following week.”

Written by NOREEN LIVOTI, for The Patriot-News

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