Future knee problems from running? [1]

Dear Alice,

I started treadmilling 3 - 4 miles a day, 6 - 7 days a week, for 30 minutes a day. Recently someone told me this could have adverse effects on my knees and joints. Is this true?

Kneed to know

Answer

Dear Kneed to know,

Lots of studies have been done on the long-term effects of running on knee health. As a whole, runners seem to have no greater amount of joint destruction or incidence of arthritis than non-runners. In fact, people who are inactive have more mobility problems later in life than their energetic counterparts. Of course, individual variations, such as the way a person trains, one's mileage, rest, recovery, and diet, and the structure of his or her bones and joints, also can have an impact on the health status of knees and other joints.

So, how does this information relate to you? A few concerns come to mind based on the description you give of your training. First of all, it sounds as though you began using the treadmill at a rather high level of exercise. This may cause injury if your joints, muscles, and connective tissue (e.g., ligaments, tendons) are not strong enough to support all of this work. A safe, progressive training program involves increasing duration or intensity by no more than 10 percent per week. (What this means is, if you begin by running 20 minutes the first week, you would increase your time by 2 minutes the second week, and so on.) This gradation computation gives your body a chance to adapt to the growing demands of the activity.

Also, running seven days a week does not allow your muscles the rest and recovery they require for repair and strengthening. Injuries may occur more frequently in people with fatigued muscles. If you feel you must do something every day, try activities that utilize muscles not involved in running, such as upper body weight training. You may wish to use your treadmill a few times a week, and cross-train by swimming or cycling on other days, challenging and strengthening your muscles in different ways. By doing so, you can alleviate the concern of overuse. Varying exercise may also sustain your interest — many people get burned out by doing the same activity day after day after day.

Another consideration is to do some weight training for your leg muscles. It's highly recommended to strengthen the muscles, tendons, and ligaments that support the knee. Knee stretches [2] contains "how-to's" on leg shaping exercises and a description of each
muscle or group of muscles that will benefit from such workouts. Many people neglect these exercises because they mistakenly think that their legs are "getting all the exercise they need" from their aerobic activity.

Alice!
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Published date:
Oct 12, 2001
Last reviewed on:
Aug 14, 2012

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