

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

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from the NEWSLETTER, APRIL 2004

PART FOUR: MUSIC AND RUNNING—YOUR ARMS MATTER TOO

In my last newsletter I encouraged you to move your workouts from the gym to the real world, where you can engage all your senses with the environment around you and avoid the pitfalls of distraction. Thanks to the arrival of spring it looks as though the entire city of New York has taken my advice to heart; walking up Flatbush Ave. in Park Slope the other day, I kept having to dodge runners headed for the park. Watching them, though, I was amazed by the number of otherwise competent runners who loped along lopsided.

An ongoing theme of these whole-body exercise guidelines has been the effect of technological change on how we move. The more you are able to see it and understand it, the better care you can take of yourself. This month's tip concerns the technology you take with you. Even when you unplug yourself from the treadmill and the TV and go to the park, chances are you're still plugging yourself in to a walkman, MP3 player, or CD player.

Your music habit likely causes you problems because you have to carry your music player. Yes, it's small and designed to be portable, but many of the designs require you to hold the gadget in your hand or attach it to your arm. No problem, you say, I only use my legs to run. Ah, not so.

Swinging your arms is a key part of running. It's an integrated part of the action of your torso, which is fundamental to moving your legs to cover space. When you move your legs, you move your pelvis, which is pretty tightly connected to your spine and ribs, so they all shift as well. Preventing your arms from moving as part of this chain is like holding a brimming cup very still so it doesn't spill in a bouncing car. You hold yourself up tall with your back away from the car seat and every sense on the alert as you correct for each movement the car makes. But you could not ride across the country this way; you'd be completely exhausted after an hour. However, once you drink your beverage, sit back, and relax again in your seat with the movement of the car travelling unopposed through you, riding in a car is so easy you could do it in your sleep.

Similarly, to hold your arms still when you run, you actually have to do things to counteract the movement of your lower body. It's much more exhausting, and it's definitely not worth the extra calorie burn. After all, it would be much more exhausting to run with a ball and chain attached to one ankle, but instead of intensifying your workout that way, you run hills or intervals. Why would you do the latter and not the former? Probably because you instinctively sense that a ball and chain around one ankle would feel terrible and is so asymmetrical you might hurt yourself.

And that's exactly my point here. If your CD player is delicate and you have to try not to bounce it when you run, you're doing all sorts of stuff with your chest and back and shoulder to keep that arm from moving. And the stuff you're doing affects the way you move your whole body. Picture again the poor runner with the ball and chain. He swings his arms wildly, doesn't he? His arm swing isn't neat and symmetrical—he has to counterbalance the asymmetrical activity of his legs. The reverse also happens. If you do something asymmetrical with your arms, your legs will reflect that. If you could hear yourself run (which you can't because of the music playing in your ears), you would hear that your right and left footfalls sound different. You're limping.

But even if your music player isn't delicate and can bounce along with the rest of you, the very fact that you're holding it makes a substantial asymmetry. Its weight matters. A person carrying a TV in one hand would run very asymmetrically because of the weight, and a person holding a walkman feels the same effect, but proportionally less. Your music arm becomes a heavier pendulum than your non-music arm, and swings slower and therefore less. That's one reason even wearing your player on an elastic band around your upper arm causes you to move that arm differently. The other reason the upper arm method doesn't work is just that your arm feels different, so you respond to that.

Your music arm is probably oriented differently than your non-music arm too, and that affects how it swings. And if you're holding your player in your hand, the fact that your fingers are closed around it with enough tension to hold it actually tenses up the musculature of that entire side of your body. Say you keep all of this in mind and successfully correct for the music player you're carrying when you run. You appear to move perfectly symmetrically. This will still compromise your running because in order to appear symmetrical you have to exert your muscles in a very asymmetrical way. And probably you have reduced your arm swing and thus the communication between your upper and lower body in order to do it, making for more effortful running. Just like the person holding the hot tea in the car, you are doing a lot of work to smooth the effect of your running on your arm. And this means much less efficient running: slower, shorter, and less comfortable. The bottom line is that, if you're carrying music (or anything else) you can't make it as though you're not.

I have seen one solution to this problem that looks pretty good, though. It's a sort of a belt that holds your CD player in the small of your back. That is absolutely the best place to carry weight (if you must) while you run. To be honest I haven't tried it out because I don't listen to music when I run, but it doesn't seem to interfere with the form of the runners I've seen. So look into that if you want to carry tunes.

Of course, portable music devices are not the only causes of asymmetry in running. Nobody's body is completely symmetrical. Your bones might have variations, such as one leg or arm longer than the other, or a curve in your spine (called scoliosis). Your habits are almost certainly asymmetrical, including using the computer mouse, driving a car with your right leg, or playing an asymmetrical sport like tennis or golf, and they carry over into everything you do. And injury in the past may have left you with asymmetrical habits of movement to compensate. Movement education is a great way to deal with these issues so you can learn how to function more symmetrically, or asymmetrically in the opposite way, if you want, and thus coordinate yourself most comfortably and effectively for each situation. But perfect symmetry is unattainable. We all just do the best we can.

You can increase the efficiency of your running by doing your best to even out the asymmetries in your gait. The most obvious step is to deal with the external factors, such as your CD player. And you

can also observe the feel and the sound of your movement and notice whether you have any habits that unbalance you. Sometimes just being aware of these habits is enough to correct them when you run. Notice your arms as well as your legs. Your workout will feel better and you'll lower your risk of injury down the road.

Before I leave this topic, I have to put in a word for running without portable sound. Your hearing is part of how you know about yourself and the world around you. It tells you when traffic is coming, whether you're about to be caught up in a gust of wind, and all sorts of things about your footfalls, your breathing, and the space you move through. The blind comic book superhero Daredevil comes to mind, with his radarlike ability to see the world around him through his hearing. It's not so farfetched—blind people are able to sense a great deal through increased attention to their hearing, and you probably sense more than you consciously realize that way. Last fall, hiking alone through the Adirondacks, I discovered I could hear changes in the terrain around me long before I could see them. A change in the sound of the wind through the trees signaled the top of a rise several minutes before the path leveled out.

If you've always run with music, ask yourself why. Do you find running so unpleasant that you need the distraction? Does the prospect of a stretch of time without scheduled programming for your mind make you uncomfortable? Or is it just a habit you've fallen into? I'm not saying you should never run with music, but do try it. When you allow yourself to hear where you are and what you're doing, you are more able to function as a whole human animal, rather than a dissonant collection of parts.

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