

## Doc, should I exercise when I am sick?



The answer is a straight forward “No” to all with no exceptions. The objectives of exercise is to maintain a healthy body and a healthy mind and exercising when you are sick carries a significant risk of mortality and morbidity.



### But It’s only a Cold

Yes, it’s only a cold. However, many viral infections have very similar symptoms such as malaise, muscle aches, sore throat and fever. An excellent example would be SARS, which has very similar symptoms of the common cold and till recently was indistinguishable other than through blood tests. Therefore, one never knows what organism is exactly causing that sore throat.

Besides, many of the common cold viruses have effects on other organs besides the upper respiratory tract. Chief concern to the athlete is the heart. Myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart, is most commonly caused by viruses, which include the common influenza virus. The clinical manifestations of myocarditis are often subtle and not easily detected. One of the potentially life threatening manifestations of myocarditis is acute arrhythmias, i.e. the heartbeats becomes very irregular. The onset is usually very sudden and the heart loses its ability to pump blood quickly, usually resulting in death. There have been reported cases of sudden deaths involving athletes who were carrying a flu at the time of exercise.

One of the rules of thumbs that have been circulating athletes’ circles is the neck rule. The rule states that if the infection is confined above the neck, it is safe to continue training and if it is below neck, it is not safe. Although this is a convenient and easy to apply yardstick, it lacks scientific validity and it also overlooks the fact that during a viral infection, viruses are often circulating in the bloodstream and hence reaches the whole body.

### Doesn’t exercise suppose to prevent illness?

Exercise has been shown to be beneficial to the overall health when done in moderation. However, the relationship between health benefits and exercise is not linear. Research has shown that sedentary individuals are more susceptible to infections. Paradoxical as it may sound, research has also shown decrease in the immunity of athletes who are involved in very high exercise load. There is a decrease in the secreted antibodies in athletes who are involved in high load exercise. Done in moderation, exercise has been shown to be beneficial to health and has a positive impact on the immune system.

### **But I need to exercise....**

Although we do not recommend strenuous exercise during a period of illness, you do not have to be bed-bound. There are some activities which you can involve in. For sports that require skills & techniques, this would be a good period to focus on those areas, eg ball control, swing techniques etc. In addition, calisthenics should be safe. Exercises that taxes the cardiovascular system, such as aerobics, are probably not advisable as it places the heart at risk.

### **Conclusion**

Although exercise has been shown to be beneficial to overall health, excessive exercise has been shown to depress the immune system. Viral infections have been shown to affect the heart and there are no reliable ways to differentiate infections affecting the heart from those that don't. As a safety precautions, we recommend rest during the period of illness and perhaps, take the opportunity to focus on skills areas.

Viruses – many types cause flu, some has myocardial effects

Exercise and immunity

Fever vs no fever/ above-below neck rule

Sudden death- incidences,

What about calisthenics? Skill training

Advice

conclusion