**Working Out While Being Sick**

We all get sick at one point or another. For those of us who work out on a regular basis, it makes it tough to know exactly what to do when sickness hits us; do we still go or are we supposed to rest?

Can we actually “sweat out” a cold? Should we stay in bed?

Let’s face it, for those who are reading this, the gym is not foreign to us, we love it, we enjoy putting in the work, and I’ll even go as far to say that rest days has us not knowing what to do with our hands! So when we are forced to take on an upper respiratory infection like; colds, coughs, flu, ear infections, and strep that affects us for a few days or more, it’s hard for us to just NOT go. I mean usually if we are sick we are stuck lying in bed, not leaving the house, not getting any Vitamin D from the sun, minimal face to face interactions, and just overall feeling like crap. The gym, which has always made us feel great afterwards, seems like the perfect “get away” from home and a step back into normality, but is it the best thing for you? Let’s first briefly look into the immune system and how it works.

The immune system as we know is our defense system to foreign pathogens and bacteria that we encounter daily through physical and airborne contact. Our immune system has both an innate and adaptive immune response to germs. Our innate immune response is our first line of defense and incudes; physical barriers, chemical barriers, and protective cells. These defense mechanisms are non-specific and help us block out germs in general. This includes things like the mucous lining in our nasal passages and stomach acids. The immune system additionally has its advanced protective cells which are adaptive and actually become more protective as we get older and build a database of pathogens our body has faced. These are our B and T cells. Yes, cells in our immune system have a “memory” that allow them to better combat illness; hence the phrase “building immunity” and is the premise of how vaccinations work!

So Should We Workout While Being Sick?

The simple answer is no. The whole “sweat out” a cold is a myth. Your immune system is in a constant battle while being sick to rid the infection that is causing your body to malfunction which induces a large amount of stress on the body. Working out causes stress on the body as is, but working out while sick is equivalent to kicking someone while they are already down and can overload the body negatively. Sure, you may actually feel great during the high-intensity workout, but what do you feel like after your workout “high” wears off? Usually exponentially worse. You begin to cough more frequently, the headache turns into a migraine, the aches begin to intensify. This is because after a high intensity workout session your immune system drops making you more prone to infection; not the best thing when you’re at a gym touching hundreds of pieces of equipment that everyone touches… especially when not everybody washes their hands!(☹)

So what CAN you do?

As we just mentioned, the immune system is being stressed as is with battling your sickness, so performing strenuous movements that require heavy breathing and exerting a great amount of physical effort is the last thing you want to do to your body as it will only further stress it. Now before you get too upset, let me ease your mind by saying that there is a difference between working out and physical activity! We associate working out with strenuous activity that elevates our heartrate and physically challenges us promoting overall fatigue. Physical activity on the other hand does not have to be strenuous nor drastically elevate our heartrate or promote fatigue. In fact, light physical activity has been shown to help the body recover quicker!

This includes activity such as:

Walking

Yoga

Low-intensity biking

Working around the house

Very low intensity lifting (RPE at 3 or lower)

Yes, I know these all are not the most exciting things to do, but your body will thank you and you will not prolong a 3 day illness into a 2 week issue of having a lingering cough with a nagging stuffed up nose. Lastly, consider utilizing a week you are sick as a deload week from the gym. A deload is where you either reduce intensity in the gym or completely take time away from the gym to allow your body to “reset”. I like to take 2-4 days off when sick and then take an equal amount of time after feeling better to lift at 50% intensity or lift at a regular intensity with about 50% total volume. This allows for a complete week to allow your joints and muscles to recover as well as getting over your sickness before returning at 100%!

So should you work out while you are sick? The simple answer is no, as it can overload the body with additional stress to the body. Now, this doesn’t mean you have to glue yourself to the couch or bed the entire duration of your illness and in fact should involve yourself with physical activity that is not strenuous. Ultimately, a good rule of thumb is to assess your sickness and use both your symptoms and common sense to dictate how active you are.

I hope this helps next time you are battling a cold and realize that even the strongest of us can’t beat a simple cold by ignoring what our body really needs---and that’s rest.