Run, cycle and swim? Tips and tricks as the weather starts to grow colder...

Many of my clients for Sports Massage are keen runners, cyclists or swimmers, or sometimes all three! They regale me with their tales of miles covered and stretches of water paddled, and I am constantly in awe of their determination and drive for their sport. I often think of their training regimes and processes, and as the weather is changing it turned my mind to the effect this must have upon them. Obviously training can be carried out indoors, on a treadmill or a stationary bike say, but how does this compare to the real environmental conditions that may be experienced in a race or event?

We were all aware of the drama surrounding the heat for this year’s London Marathon but as the temperature starts to drop, let’s turn our thoughts to what happens at the other end of the thermometer. Your physiological responses to exercising in cold air are different to those that occur in more temperate environments. Research has shown that exposure to cold air can have perverse effects on the immune system. The cold enhances the effects of a type of ‘suppressor’ macrophage which depresses the functioning of the immune system. So what can you do to boost your immune system back up? More cold weather training! Prolonged exposure to cold air training can blunt this suppressor macrophage response, so keeping your outdoor training regular throughout the colder months will fair you in better stead than only venturing outside periodically, or only when competing.

Sudden and unexpected exposure to cold air carries the most risk and not just for your immune system. Cold air increases the heart rate and blood pressure, therefore putting more stress on the heart and it’s also known that our blood clots more easily in cold weather. It makes sense that if cold air exposure is sporadic then it will come as more of a shock to the body and increase these changes. To minimise the magnitude of our physiological changes, ‘getting used’ to training in the cold may be the answer.

But it’s not all bad. In fact, cold weather training is the best environment for aiding fat burn. Glycogen depletion is fast due to shivering and adrenaline from the cold and so the body quickly turns to its fat stores for energy. Training in cold air enhances the breakdown of fat, particularly the kind that clings to your internal organs which is most closely linked to high levels of ‘bad’ cholesterol (LDLs). Other benefits may include faster times! Training in cold weather places greater pressure on the breath; this is a good thing! It helps train your lungs and whole body to utilise oxygen more efficiently, therefore boosting your overall athletic performance. Some research has found that as a result of this, regular training in cold weather has the potential to add an average of 29% to athletes running speed. And if you needed any more encouragement, it’s a fool proof way to beat those winter blues due to the mood-enhancing effects of exercise. So what are you waiting for?!

Here are some pointers you can start to implement as the weather changes. Although you may experience faster times in regular cold weather training, speed work should not consciously be added to your training regime during winter. In terms of clothing, dress like an onion and peel! You should be a little bit cold at the start of your workout so if it’s only moderately cold wear no more than 2 layers. If it’s really cold, wear up to 3 layers and think about how you can protect the face and neck areas as these can easily be exposed. Also think about protecting your hands and feet especially if you have bad circulation or low blood pressure. Swimmers think about full wetsuits in cold water and always have your head and feet covered. It’s useful to plan the time of day that you will work out as it’s colder in the early mornings and evenings, so running or cycling in the ‘heat’ of the day could be better, particularly if you are not used to cold weather training. Also think about your direction; go into the wind on the way out and have the wind at your back on your way home. Remember: mind over emotions. And don’t forget the lip balm and snacks!

Lastly, ensure you have a full warm up before training and a thorough cool down/keeping warm afterwards! Do your warm up indoors where you can properly warm the muscles and deeper muscles ready for training. Take your time, do some light stretches and get the blood pumping around the body. When you get home or back to the car, ensure that it is warm. ‘Cool down’ with some light mobility exercises and as long as you are warm you can include some deeper stretches to maintain good flexibility and form. Importantly, listen to your body and train as you see fit – if you are not used to cold weather training take things slow and give yourself time to experiment with your clothing and distances. It also wouldn’t hurt to get a massage! As I mentioned before, your immune system may be slightly under-functioning as you begin training in cold air so a massage is perfect for increasing lymph flow which is packed with white blood cells. As well as lymph flow, massage increases blood circulation and skin hydration – so bust those winter blues and treat yourself to some regular cold weather training followed by a sports massage. You’ll feel like a superhero!