

More health concerns

Recently I wrote an article reminding runners that just because they might be in good condition, doesn't necessarily mean they are heart healthy. Runners aren't invincible, and now an article by John Brant in Men's Health warns runners about more health hazards.

Brant, a runner, said his previous routine would be to take off during his lunch hour to run through a park in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. However, to reach the park, Brant had to run about a mile along the busy thoroughfare of Fremont Ave. Cars, trucks and buses were emitting fumes, but he figured it was worth the jog to reach the park.

However, he has discovered that the trek to the park was filling his body with large quantities of ozone, carbon monoxide, microscopic particle matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, lead and many other pollutants. Excuse me while I cough for a while. His healthy run was in fact wrecking his health.

The result of the run next to the thoroughfare was, as he says, reducing, not increasing, his lung function, constricting his air passages, courting chest pain, increasing his chances of developing asthma, unleashing free radicals to catalyze carcinogens in his bloodstream, and activating cellular processes that might lead to a heart attack.

Rachel Langford, coordinator of the Clean Air Project for the American Lung Association in Oregon, was quoted in the article as saying, "When I see people running or bicycling along a busy street in the middle of the day, I want to tackle them and scream at them stop. At some intersections, we ought to post 'No Exercise Allowed' signs."

Because exercisers breathe in 10 to 15 times more pollutants than sedentary people, more of those pollutants are going deeper into the lungs, according to Rob McConnell, M.D., who's a researcher in the department of preventive medicine at the University of Southern California medical school. He was quoted in the article: "In fact," he said, "just by stepping out the door, you could be exposed to five times the ozone you'd inhale if you stayed inside. So, if you're outdoors and exercising...well, do the math."

For those runners or cyclists who breathe through their mouths, it's even worse, the experts say, because the filtering of the nasal passages is bypassed.

So, what happens when breathing in these pollutants? The experts say the body tries to defend itself by tightening air passages, making breathing labored. While working furiously to protect us from that air, our pulmonary and cardiovascular systems are strained and could eventually break down. Early symptoms include wheezing, coughing, scratchy throat, headache, chest pains and watery eyes. Henry Gong Jr., M.D., an air-pollution researcher at the University of Southern California medical school, says this in the article: "Healthy, active people tend to underestimate the harmful effects of polluted

air, because they don't wheeze or experience chest pain. Feeling invulnerable, they continue to exercise, putting themselves at great risk."

So, what to do? Dr. Gong says by all means keep running. But avoid busy streets, he says. "If you run just a block away, your risk will be significantly lower," he says in the article.

Other suggestions, which many runners have heard or read before, include exercising early in the day when pollutants are at their lowest levels, or after nightfall, when traffic decreases. The article said ozone accumulates to significant levels by about 11 a.m. and peaks about 3 p.m. After sunset, ozone can no longer form, so the concentration decreases. And, as we know here, ozone levels rise significantly during the warmer months.

So, just remember (and I have three stents to prove it) that running doesn't make you invincible.