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A World Of Hurt

Running into trouble

Many runners try to do too much too soon, orthopaedic sports surgeon Tan Jee Lim tells **Alison de Souza**.

First, the good news: More Singaporeans are exercising regularly, with about 48 per cent ditching the couch at least once a week to work out or play a sport, according to the latest national survey.

The not-so-good news? This will probably mean more injuries. Take running, for instance. Most people would not think twice about going for a jog, but some studies say as many as two thirds of all runners will hurt themselves at least once a year, or that one injury occurs for every 100 to 200 hours of running.

"It's often a case of too much too soon," says consultant orthopaedic sports surgeon Tan Jee Lim, the immediate past president of the Sports Medicine Association of Singapore. "Running is a non-contact sport so it's usually overuse injuries in either the bones, tendons or muscles."

The catalogue of horrors can include stress fractures, knee pain and bunions. Dr M. Yegappan, a consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's department of orthopaedic surgery, says most of the running injuries it sees involve overuse of the lower limbs and torn tendons.

This is hardly surprising when you consider that a runner's every stride exerts an impact of three to five times their body weight, says Dr Tan. So for someone weighing 50kg, each heel strike can mean a force of up to 250kg on their legs.

And there are more ill tidings if you are of a certain age. Most of Dr Tan's patients are in their 40s and 50s, confirming the trend of more babyboomers getting active — and getting hurt.

He puts this down to three things: greater awareness of the importance of exercise, greater affluence as people have more time to exercise, and a lack of understanding of how to do it properly.

"We have very fond memories of our youth. Unfortunately, our bodies have deteriorated since then," he says wryly.

One person who knows this all too

well is Madam Choo Li Hiang. The 39-year-old pharmaceutical sales representative was fairly athletic and active, running, in-line skating and rockclimbing when she was younger. Now a mother of two, she has settled into a more sedentary lifestyle.

"I used to be thin, but have put on about 6kg in the last two years. I turn 40 this year, so I wanted to lose some weight but continue the way I'm eating."

This goal prompted her to start running last December. Although she had not hit the track for some time, within a few months she went from doing three rounds to about 10 rounds, or 4 to 5km a session.

One afternoon in March, two days after her last run, her left knee began to hurt. By the end of the week, the pain had become unbearable. An MRI scan revealed she had a stress fracture, which put her on crutches for a month. She has since been on medical leave for more than two months.

And, of course, the exercising had to stop. "I thought I was doing everything correctly. I ran on rubberised track, not concrete. I bought good shoes and ran only every other day. And in the course of doing it I didn't feel any discomfort.

"But I still did too much because I increased the intensity and duration too quickly. When I told the doctor how much I'd been running, he thought I was quite mad."

On the upside, most sports injuries can be treated the way Madam Choo's was — non-surgically. "We do physiotherapy, advise patients on things like proper shoes, and teach them a bit about the biomechanics of running," says Dr Tan.

In the end, this education may be the most important thing prescribed. Because, he says, the body is usually able to handle the stress of exercise — if you give it a chance.

Alison de Souza is a freelance writer. This is the first in a series on common sporting injuries.

*E-mail: aliondesouza@email.com
Additional reporting by Chew Xiang*