**Exericse & the Heart**

a time to reflect on the huge benefits and small risks.

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**Does regular exercise prevent heart attacks and death?**

Yes. Numerous large studies have assessed physical activity and health outcomes and demonstrated that the risk of heart attack is reduced. For example, the Harvard Alumni Health Study assessed over 12,000 middle-aged men and found that the rate of heart disease was reduced with increasing amounts of leisure time activity. In a larger study of nearly 44,500 men, jogging at least 30 minutes a week reduced the chance of developing heart disease by a massive 42%. The results for women are virtually identical. Not only does exercise prevent heart disease, it decreases your chance of dying from any cause.

**What is heart disease?**

Heart disease refers to symptoms of chest pain or a sudden heart attack caused by the build-up of cholesterol in the heart arteries. Traditional risk factors include smoking, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and a family history of heart disease. Exercise does not make you immune from the dangers of these. Runners with high blood pressure or high cholesterol should be treated in the same manner as those who are active. However, exercise has two major benefits – it reduces the risk of heart disease independently of other risk factors.

As a heart specialist with a research interest in athletes’ heart, 2001 highlighted the paradox of the relationship between sport and health. Every well conducted research project comes up with the same clear message – moderate exercise is good for you. The death of an athlete creates major headlines and distorts the fact that the sudden death of a young athlete is a very rare event.

The recent deaths of Ryan Shay in the US Olympic Trials Marathon demonstrate how nothing can be more unexpected or tragic. As a former US half and full marathon champion, Ryan had proven that he had the cardiovascular makeup of a champion. His death remains unexplained. Also in the US, the deaths of Chad Schieber, Matthew Hardy and Dorothy Barnett-Griffin all occurred during, or soon after, marathon or long-distance triathlon racing. In South Africa, two well performed athletes – Michael Jordan and William Mbuli – died after struggling across the finish line in the Comrades Marathon. These events, once confined to regional newspapers, are now shared across web-based media sources – reaching a far greater audience. With increased frequency we hear of these tragic deaths but this does not necessarily reflect an increasing incidence. It is important to remember that sudden death occurs very rarely – approximately 1 in 200,000 young athletes per year. This equates to 1 in 2,150,000,000 people.

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