



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Swimming verses Running

Q: *I seriously injured my right knee playing high school football and have functioned very well until recently when my knee started getting sore and swollen after long runs and mountain hiking. X-rays show I have arthritis in this knee and I was advised to run less and to do more low impact fitness activities. I have started swimming but I wonder if this will keep me as fit as my running program?*

A: Glad to hear you are staying active. Swimming and running are both excellent forms of cardiovascular exercise that offer many health benefits, but they aren't suited to everyone. Here is a brief comparison of some the advantages each of these activities has to offer:

1. Running may be a better choice if you are trying to lose weight. The Mayo Clinic estimates that while exercising at the same intensity a person will burn approximately 40% more calories running than they will swimming.
2. The resistance provided by water makes swimming a better full body workout.
3. Running is a more convenient activity as it can be done nearly anywhere, at any time and with minimal equipment.
4. Swimming is a more variable activity. You can do a number of different strokes such as breast or back stroke, front crawl or butterfly. You can also change things up by using equipment such as fins, paddles, pull buoys and kick boards. This variety allows swimmers to work different muscle groups and train at different intensities all in the same workout. Runners can vary the intensity of their training but not their technique.
5. Running is one of the simplest forms of exercise that most people instinctively learn to do in early childhood. Swimming is a skill people must be taught and practice to be able to do well.
6. Swimming is a non impact form of exercise that is far more gentle on your joints than running. Given this lack of impact, runners often use swimming or pool 'running' to stay fit while they recover from their injuries.
7. Running is a high impact activity that can help increase the strength and mass of your bones;
8. Swimmers never have to worry about angry dogs, distracted drivers or freezing rain!
9. Runners never smell like chlorine!
10. Running and swimming can both be a lot of fun!

The bottom line: Swimming and running are both excellent ways to stay fit and you don't have to choose between doing one or the other. Many people alternate running and swimming workouts and in that way get to enjoy the benefits of both – something we call cross training. Give this excellent fitness strategy a try – I think your knee will love you for it. Train smart and remember exercise is medicine in motion!

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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