

# Compulsive Exercise: Too Much of a Good Thing?

Contributed by Suzanne Girard Eberle, MS, RD

While the benefits of exercise are numerous and well-known, it can be harmful to do too much of a good thing.

## Red flags that you may be exercising for the wrong reasons include:

- Constant preoccupation with exercise routine or intrusive thoughts about exercise that interfere with your ability to concentrate or focus
- Finding time at any cost to exercise, like cutting school or taking time off from work
- Exercise is your social life – you turn down social activities so as not to miss your scheduled workout
- You feel overly anxious, guilty or angry if unable to exercise and you can't tolerate changes or interruptions of your exercise routine
- You exercise alone to avoid having your routine disturbed
- You exercising is driven primarily by a desire to control your weight, shape and/or body composition
- Food choices based solely on exercise (you exercise as punishment for eating "bad" foods, to purge calories or you overly restrict what you eat if you can't exercise)
- You lie about exercise or you always exercise alone
- You can't take rest days or time off from exercise – even if you're injured or ill
- Persistent desire and/or unsuccessful attempts to control or reduce exercise (e.g. can't take a day off during the week or time off periodically throughout the year)
- You engage in non-purposeful or excessive exercise beyond a sensible fitness or training program (more than once a day or for long bouts of time; beyond what coach advises)
- How you feel about yourself on a daily basis is based on how much exercise you perform or how hard you work out
- Exercise isn't fun or pleasurable or you're never satisfied with your physical achievements
- In females: amenorrhea (loss of three consecutive menses or failure to begin menstruating by age sixteen) and/or stress fractures

Compulsive exercise is often associated with disordered eating habits. Any active female who under-eats, over-exercises or both is at risk for the Female Athlete Triad. Also called the "Energy Drain," the Female Athlete Triad refers to three serious interrelated health problems: disordered eating habits, amenorrhea and osteoporosis.

1. The Female Athlete Triad is precipitated by **under-fueling** (consuming too few calories, usually deliberately in an attempt to lose weight quickly to improve appearance or performance) and aggravated by psychological stress.
2. The ovaries produce less and less estrogen, resulting in menstrual irregularities and often **amenorrhea**.
3. This low estrogen level also promotes or accelerates the loss of normal bone density, setting the stage for **fragile and brittle bones that fracture easily (stress fractures and osteoporosis)**.

To undo the Female Athlete Triad you must correct the energy (caloric) imbalance by consuming enough calories to support your physical activity level. Dietary changes alone, however, are rarely enough to reverse the Triad. Just taking calcium supplements, for example, does not compensate for the lack of estrogen. You will also need to address your exercise habits and coping strategies for dealing with stress. Seek help for compulsive exercise or the "Energy Drain" from therapists and registered dietitians who specialize in disordered eating/eating disorders. Lastly, amenorrhea should always be evaluated by a qualified physician as soon as possible in order to prevent damaging health consequences.

