

We hear ad nauseam about how exercise makes you happier, stronger and more energetic. But what we don't hear nearly enough is that exercising also can do the opposite and bring on depression, injuries and lethargy.

The culprit is overtraining. It mostly happens to elite athletes, but it can strike anyone who doesn't know where to draw the line.

There are warning signs, said Sabrena Jo, a senior exercise scientist for the American Council on Exercise. "The first sign of overtraining is when the performance of the exercise starts decreasing," she said.

Pain is another red flag, but it also can be tricky. Dr. Joe Park, an orthopedic surgeon with the University of Virginia Health System who treats a lot of runners, warned that pain often subsides during a run as the muscles and tendons loosen up during

movement. So instead of monitoring pain only during the activity, watch for it after you stop, he said.

If injuries start accumulating, it should be an immediate concern. "The same person might have a hamstring tear, an Achilles tear and a stress fracture," he said. "It might be time to ask if it's really the right sport for you."

Kendall Black, a Washington, D.C., physical therapist, said another warning sign is when the pain subsides but the area in question feels tight. "Take note if there is stiffness and a decrease in range of motion," she said.

Sleep disturbances, moodiness and lack of motivation all might be due to hormonal changes that can occur with overtraining. But the area is not well understood, Jo said. "Cortisol — the stress hormone — plays a role, but it is not clear how."

For female athletes, missed menstrual periods can be a sign of overtraining and

should not be taken lightly, Park said. "That's associated with bone-density loss and should be addressed. It's not a small matter," he said.

One way to avoid overtraining is to ramp up exercise routines gradually, the experts agreed. "The rule of progression is to increase no more than 5 to 10 percent every few weeks whether it's distance traveled, weight load or intensity," Jo said.

Rest also is key. That includes good sleep (7 to 9 hours) and not repeating the same activity too often. "You want give yourself 48 hours of rest between intense activities," Jo said.

Black also tells his patients that they shouldn't worry about trying to match how hard their friends are working out and find a fitness routine that gives them the mental and physical rewards they seek without causing problems.

"Wear and tear is not necessary," he said. "There is a sweet spot."