

Many athletes -- high school, college, even middle schoolers -- often ask the same question: How much "vacation" time off is best?

Now that's a good one, especially in these times of specialization and competition at every level. Quite often the answer is that less is better even though the standard belief is "more is better".

More running, more lifting, more training and then some. Year-round training on top of the regular season, whatever the sport, is common. The better the athlete, the more the pressure mounts to take very little, if any, down time.

The best coaches, trainers, therapists and doctors that I talk with almost unanimously feel we're way into the area of overkill. Athletes, their parents and many times their coaches favor aggressive offseason workouts with little if any real recovery time. My recommendation is to take at least three weeks away from the sport and its offseason workouts. Let's call it my famous "intelligent rest."

From middle school through college, I try to tell these kids to allow these few weeks for mental and physical recovery. It doesn't mean do nothing, but getting away from the routine allows the mind and body to relax, rebuild, and rejuvenate. The explosion of overuse injuries -- repetitive motion problems at younger and younger ages -- is often a direct result of this, as is mental burnout.

A few decades ago, even the pros had their offseasons. Today, that's all changed. It's one of the arts of sports medicine: How much is too much?

Take some recovery time. Go to the beach. Spend some time with your friends and family. Your body will thank you for it and you'll be a better athlete!

By the way, the advice also is the same for all you recreational athletes, runners, triathlons, tennis players, strength trainers, etc. If you're a year-rounder, factor in some recovery time, vacation time away from your sport and its training.

Again, I'm not saying be a couch potato and do nothing -- maybe be a walker for a few weeks and allow some recovery -- it makes good sense.

I've gotten numerous e-mails with questions and along with answering them personally, let's take a few this month.

Q: Otto from Bolingbrook: I'm a 49-year-old serious runner for the past 10 years with seven marathons under my belt. A few months ago, I had pain behind my heel. After a few weeks off, it felt fine, but it reoccurred twice. Is rest enough?

A: Well -- no it isn't enough -- you've got to get a diagnosis. Could be Achilles tendonitis, bursitis or bone spur related. You said you've got mildly pronated feet and that could be the aggravator. Physical therapy and orthotics are sensible directions to heal the area, strengthen the area and properly position your feet to prevent re-injury. Get the diagnosis!

Q: Gerry from Naperville: My 16-year-old daughter has always been an athlete -- tennis, softball, basketball since grade school. Shin splints have always a problem on and off. X-rays of her shins are negative. Suggestions?

A: Absolutely -- so often persistent shin problems are foot related. Pronated, rolled in feet are commonly associated with shin problems due to overuse of the tibial tendon whose job it is to slow down pronation.

Jumping sports as well as running greatly increases forces through the foot, ankle, lower leg. My experience is that 90 percent of persistent shin problems (once stress fracture is ruled out) will respond to orthotic control and physical therapy.

Intelligent rest is important, especially with the year-round pounding. Go to my Web site sportsdoctorradio.com and click on newspaper articles -- 9/25/07 -- for an article on shin splints. Anybody can have shin problems, especially if running and jumping action is too aggressive, too soon or on hard surfaces. When the problem is persistent and reoccurring then we're looking at foot mechanics.

The NBA and NHL finally winding down. The Bulls and Blackhawks are two good young teams, with bright futures. These athletes are amazing -- 6-8 months, 100 games or so. Time for some "intelligent rest." See you next month.

Dr. Robert Weil is a sports podiatrist from Naperville with an office in Aurora. You can hear him on his weekly radio show at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays on 90.9-FM. Contact him at drweilsportsdoctor@yahoo.com and visit his Web site at Sportsdoctorradio.com.