EXERCISING IN THE HEAT

Swimming, biking and running your first ITU World Triathlon Abu Dhabi can be a daunting challenge. But doing all of that in Abu Dhabi where, even in March, daytime temperatures can reach around 30 degrees Celsius, can be an even bigger ask.

Running in the heat – even mild heat – can affect your performance. According to the French National Institute of Sport and Physical Education, the optimal temperature for professional male marathon runners is below 5 degrees Celsius.

“This is because the majority of the energy generated by muscles during exercise ends up as heat. That’s what keeps us warm in cold weather,” says Dr. Nicole Sirotin, Chair of Preventative Medicine in Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi’s Medical Subspecialties Institute.

“In hot weather the body needs to get rid of that heat by sweating and by increasing blood flow to the skin. This means that not as much blood is able to supply oxygen to the muscles which are working hard during your run because it is busy attempting to lose heat.”

So, what can you do to make your body better able to perform in the heat?

01 Acclimatize Your Body

According to Dr. Sirotin, the key to competing in a triathlon at these sort of temperatures is to plan for the event long in advance. “Acclimatizing your body to running in the heat is very important,” she says. “The moment you start running in this sort of heat, your body quickly begins to adapt. After a week of training in moderate heat, your blood plasma volume starts increasing. This means you have more fluid you can use as sweat while at the same time meaning that there is more blood to supply oxygen to your muscles.”

02 Keep Hydrated

Ensuring that you are always well hydrated during these runs is also vital, Dr. Sirotin adds. “Drinking water is obviously important, but drinking a couple of sports drinks can also help to improve your performance because sports drinks contain electrolytes, which increase your water absorption rate and replace the electrolytes you lose in sweat.” However, try not to drink too many sports drinks because they contain high levels of salt and sugar. Also, it’s best to avoid caffeine or alcohol because they have a diuretic effect. “One way to make sure that you are drinking enough is to check that your urine is a light straw color,” she says.

03 Train During the Cooler Hours

Ensuring that your training runs take place during the cooler parts of the day is important, Dr. Sirotin says. “In Abu Dhabi, even during the winter, the middle of the day can be uncomfortably hot. Instead, try to run either during the early morning or late evening when the sun is at its lowest. And, if you must run during the day, try to keep yourself out of the sun as much as possible – both by running in the shade and by wearing clothing that keeps the sun from burning your skin.”
Make Adjustments for the Heat

Even with the best hydration, clothing and training possible, good runners still know that exercising at higher temperatures can be risky, so make sure you tailor your expectations to the course, Dr. Sirotin adds. "Generally, it’s best to start your workout slower than you usually do. If you’re feeling good halfway through, it’s okay to speed up a little bit."

Know the Warning Signs

Just in case you suffer problems, it’s best to make sure that you’re aware of the signs of heatstroke and dehydration, Dr. Sirotin says. "If you unusually feel weak, dizzy, faint, disoriented, or your skin feels strangely hot or cold, make sure you slow down or stop running," she says. "If the symptoms persist, seek medical attention."

About Nicole Sirotin, MD

Chair, Preventive Medicine, Medical Specialties Institute, Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi.

Nicole Sirotin, MD, is Chair of Preventive Medicine in the Medical Subspecialties Institute and leads the Executive Health Program at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi.

Dr. Sirotin is among the first medical professionals globally to be certified as Diplomates of the ABLM/American College of Lifestyle Medicine (ACLM) and the International Board of Lifestyle Medicine. Lifestyle Medicine is the use of evidence-based lifestyle therapeutic approaches, such as a predominantly whole food, plant-based diet, physical activity, adequate sleep, stress management, tobacco cessation, and other non-drug modalities, to prevent, treat, and reverse chronic disease.

Dr. Sirotin earned her medical degree from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, New Jersey Medical School and completed her residency in Primary Care/General Internal Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, with a Health Equities Area of Distinction. After residency, Dr. Sirotin completed a research fellowship in Global Public Health at the University of California, San Diego.

Dr. Sirotin’s greatest accomplishments have always been the positive changes she has helped her patients realize, whether they were UAE nationals struggling with diabetes and obesity, New Yorkers with heart disease, or refugees seeking asylum in the US.