STOP running, or you will wear down your knees! Does that statement remind you of a friend or relative? All runners have heard that at least once! What if it was only a myth, and that running wasn’t detrimental to your joints? What if running could even be good for your joints?

RUNNING AND OSTEOARTHRITIS

Osteoarthritis, which could also be seen as ‘ageing of the joints’, is often associated with running. Interestingly, recent research suggests that runners may not be more at risk of developing osteoarthritis in their knees and hips. A study totaling over 125,000 individuals even reported 3 times less hip and knee osteoarthritis in recreational runners than in non-runners (3.5% vs. 10.2%)! Believe it or not: running has also been associated with a 50% lower probability of getting a total knee replacement. However, studies also outlined that there may be an ideal dosage for optimal joint health: professional and elite runners showed almost 4 times more osteoarthritis than recreational runners (13.3%). Thus, based on these numbers, it is not accurate to say that recreational running leads to ‘wear and tear’ of your joints.

WHY IS IMPACT GOOD FOR MY JOINTS?

Repeated loading is necessary to maintain optimal joint health. Moderate impact allows your cartilage to stay strong, just like muscles stay stronger with weight training. In fact, cartilage can slowly become more tolerant to impact. On the opposite, if you do not stimulate your body enough, the different structures will become weaker. Use it or Lose it! In a study conducted in Belgium, a 10-week ‘Start to Run’ program was enough to start increasing knee cartilage’s structural strength, while participants in the control group who did not exercise lost cartilage strength. Keep in mind that people in that study were young and healthy; so if you are older, cartilage build up may take longer. However, using magnetic resonance imaging, another research group showed that experienced marathon runners (young AND old) had thicker knee cartilage than their non-running counterparts. Overall, and opposite to what a lot of people believe, running can potentially make your joints stronger!
Things to Keep in Mind

Osteoarthritis can be precipitated by other factors. For example, if you have been engaging in contact sports, you may be more at risk. If you have seriously injured your knee in the past (for example: ruptured your anterior cruciate ligament – ACL), you are also more at risk. However, if you feel fine during running and don’t have knee pain, then you’re most likely good to go running, regardless of your past injuries. Obesity and genetics are also known risk factors for osteoarthritis. There’s not much you can do about genetics, but your lifestyle including walking and running will help control your weight!

Next time a friend or relative throw warnings at you for being a runner, you should be able to argue otherwise! Several factors can contribute to knee and hip osteoarthritis, but running is not one of them. When combined with all physical and psychological health benefits discussed in the first article of this series, it makes a lot of sense to start a running program... and to keep going!


