Are you resting enough?

You don’t get fitter without recovering properly from your training — but how do you work out how much R&R you actually need? Lynn Clay investigates

With most of Great Britain’s population being told on a regular basis to do more, in contrast many regular cyclists should perhaps be asking if they are, in fact, doing too much. Reaching peak fitness takes regular training and dedication, but ensuring that you are not doing too much too soon on the bike is as much a part of successful cycling as getting on the bike in the first place. Managing your training load to avoid over-reaching and overtraining is an important step to cycling success, with several key markers keeping you on track.

What is over-reaching and overtraining?

If you ride and train regularly you will have experienced the fatigue that can follow a long ride or week of hard sessions. This is an expected part of trying to improve your fitness. Training adaptations and progress are achieved through a process of overloading your body, challenging it beyond its current limits. Over-reaching is a normal consequence of this — it is a state of fatigue that can be managed with a few days of extra rest.

Overtraining, in contrast, is where there is unplanned excessive load and inadequate rest. This might be where you’ve upped your mileage by too much on a whim or just gone out too hard on some planned easy rides, or perhaps work or other external stressors have added to your total stress load, leaving your body less able to cope with training. A U-turn in progress is one of the first signs of over-reaching and a sign that you need to take some extra rest and watch out for symptoms of overtraining.

Periodise your training

Proper periodisation of training contributes to preventing overtraining syndrome. This requires a training programme to be well balanced so that there is progressive load followed by a period of reduced load to allow the body to adapt. You will see this in many programmes as three building weeks followed by a fourth lower-mileage week. Training without this simple framework is likely to leave you not only suffering from fatigue and at risk of overtraining symptoms but unable to reap medical complications such as an impaired immune system.

It’s estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of regular exercisers experience the symptoms of overtraining or staleness at some point in their training. The good news is, a well-tailored training plan and monitoring of some of the physiological cues that indicate an increase in stress are an effective strategy for avoiding overtraining and making continual progress — if you can keep track of those cues!

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the performance rewards of your hard training. In extremely intense periods you may shorten the build period to two weeks and take the third as reduced recovery.

Follow hard days with easy days
Simply training too intensely a few days in a row can increase your risk of overtraining so it is sensible to follow each hard training day with an easy day to help the body recover, replenish fuel stores and rebalance the immune system. The hard/easy system provides variety, relaxation and focus. Cyclists learn to

Take a break
Apart from following a build and recovery pattern in your training you should also plan in times of the year when you take a complete break from training. A mid-season break of one week is a good idea, with two weeks or more off the bike and perhaps

Recover from your main event
If you’ve built up all year for a particular event, or perhaps tackled something spectacular like La Marmotte sportive, your body will need a good rest in the period afterwards. Taking a week off at times like this can see you cycling much more strongly longer term compared to getting straight back into your training. Exhaustive events deplete the body’s glycogen stores, leaving it in its most vulnerable state. Low glycogen stores will leave your immune system vulnerable and it is well documented that infection rate increases during this time. Resting and refuelling your stores is the best idea in these periods.

Feed your body adequately
Failing to meet your body’s carbohydrate or protein needs can leave your immune system vulnerable and compromise your recovery. Good nutrition, therefore, is fundamentally important to any training programme. Matching your calorie needs to energy expenditure and upping both carbohydrate and protein during intense training periods will keep you on track, as will refuelling in the immediate period after training.

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Even an excellent training plan can lead you off track sometimes as the body falls to adapt during periods of stress. This is where tracking physiological markers of stress can help you make a decision as to whether to train or not. Here are some of the common markers.

Heart rate
The most universally used marker for physiological stress in the sports world is heart rate. Indeed, many athletes track their resting heart rate to help them decide how hard to train or whether to take a day off rest, and this could be a useful tool for all cyclists. An increase of resting heart rate of more than 30 beats per minute is generally the marker used to indicate a day off is required. One of the problems however, with using this as a sole marker is that a stressful day at work, an argument or even a strong cup of coffee can lift heart rate. Taking your pulse first thing in the morning can remove some of this error but what’s the point of that if you want to train in the evening? You may not be sufficiently recovered from last night’s session in the morning but may be totally ready to train again come the evening. Despite these shortcomings, knowing your resting heart rate and keeping an eye on this can help you make a decision regarding training or resting but is more useful when combined with other markers.

Body weight and hydration status
Although some of you may put your hands up in celebration when seeing a weight loss on the scales, a sudden loss of weight which seems unexplained can be a sign that the body is struggling to

 sampling other activities in the off-season. This will give your body and mind time to recuperate and get ready for another period of training. You don’t have to be completely inactive in these periods but just take some time off the bike.

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