



If your workouts feel like drudgery and punishment and they interfere with your social or family life, then you may have a problem. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY HEATHER S. HUGHES/DAILY PRESS

# A damaging exercise

Do you know exercise could be a significant part of our lives. But is it possible to get too much of a good thing?

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He doesn't remember her name. But Michael Deschenes, an associate professor of exercise physiology at William and Mary, hasn't forgotten her. She was virtually all skin and bones, which everyone

understood to be the product of a restricted diet and constant trips to the gym. Come to think of it, she always seemed to be on her way to or from a workout. Until that day she nearly collapsed and vomited on a treadmill, and the folks at the gym told her never to return.

"She had a serious problem," Deschenes said. "I mean, it was as clear as the nose on your face. She was so thin, she was always cold, and all she talked about was exercise, exercise, exercise. It completely consumed her."

Like any addiction can. And to some, exercise can be

an addiction — usually a relatively healthy one, but sometimes dangerous to your health. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends no more than five one-hour workout sessions a week and stresses the importance of days off. But for some, a day without exercise would be like a day without water.

"You can be addicted to exercise for the health and psychological benefits you get," said Tracye Ziglar, a personal trainer at Fitness Consultants in Newport News. "The difference comes if it's interfering with your

social or family life. Is it an obsessive thought, your first priority?

"One of the keys to tell whether it's gone beyond a healthy addiction is when they are told they need to rest, whether it's by a physician for an injury or whatever. It's scary to them. They have a fear of stopping, either for losing ground in performance or weight loss. Every fitness trainer sees it, and probably more than once a month."

Given the alarming rise in childhood obesity, exercise

Please see EXERCISE/C13

## When to exercise caution

Signs of an unhealthy addiction to exercise:

- Sacrificing your work, social life or family time in order to get in a workout.
- Refusing to skip a workout when you're sick or injured.
- An overall sense of fatigue or irritation.
- A feeling of guilt if you miss a session.
- A feeling that you "have to" work out rather than "want to."

rupt — or even damage — lives. In its most severe form, excessive exercise can lower a person's heartbeat to the point where it literally stops.

"I've seen people working out four times a day, two hours each session, seven days a week, no matter what," said Edward Cumella, the executive director at Remuda Ranch, an eating-disorder treatment facility in Wickenburg, Ariz. "Those are the extreme cases, but most people are not aware that too much exercise is a bad thing."

A bad thing to varying degrees. Some exercise addicts simply overdo it and need a reminder to scale back. Others drive themselves to the point of collapse.

#### 'A HEALTHY ADDICTION'

Robin Bobrick's weight had reached 180 pounds, too much even on her 5-foot-10 frame. So five years ago, she decided to do something about it. She began a regimen of diet and exercise, and in about six months was down to 130. Today, she's in the best shape of her life.

Sonia Willis knew she was too heavy, so she hired Debbie Teller of Busy Bodies in Newport News as her personal trainer. With a commitment to exercise she never had before, she lost more than 100 pounds (she declines to cite her weight then or now). Today, she's in the best shape of her life.

Bobrick, a 39-year-old mother of three who lives in Newport News, says she works out six days a week. She runs three of those days, probably a combined 20 miles. On some days, she lifts weights. On some days, she does cardio. And on some days, she teaches fitness classes.

That's a step back from her routine a year ago, when she would run five or six miles and lift virtually every day. But when she started feeling fatigued during the day, she realized she was overdoing it.

"Am I an exercise addict?" she said. "A year ago, I was flirting with the boundaries of being one. I might have been on my way to chronic fatigue syndrome. I've backed off a lot. But even now, I'm still pretty compulsive."

Willis, a 33-year-old mother from Smithfield, knows she's hooked on working out. And looking at it from her point of view, it's understandable. Hard work got her where she is now, and she wants no part of letting up. So she exercises six, sometimes seven, days a week. She recently put herself through a three-hour session following a short night of sleep.

"I do feel like I need that exercise," Willis said. "When I don't work out, I feel like something's missing. I get irritable. I do feel there's something there you're physically addicted to. I



When Peach Friedman, left, crossed the dangerous exercise line, her mom, Chris, intervened, making sure that Peach exercised sensibly. PHOTO SUBMITTED

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Yet how do you know when a healthy addiction becomes dangerous?

"There's a fine line," Ziglar said. "If weight loss is your goal, you do have to significantly increase your calorie expenditure. The catch is when you get to an appropriate weight and you start sacrificing body muscle, health, injury, to sustain it. When you continue moving on that path, joy and pleasure has nothing to do with it. And you cross the line."

#### THE EXTREME

Peach Friedman crossed the line.

Six years ago, during her senior year of college, she began working out to get thinner. She didn't really need to — at 5-foot-9, she weighed a healthy 145 pounds. But in a society that demands all women be a size 2, she became a victim.

Every morning began with a 10-mile run. After classes, she would either swim some laps or go for another run. She limited herself to 800 calories, roughly one-third of what most dietitians consider healthy. Her weight fell to a skeletal 100 pounds. She had stopped menstruating and was at risk for heart failure.

She had exercise bulimia — a disorder in which calories are purged through life-threatening levels of exercise.

"All along I thought I was in control of it," said Friedman, who grew up in Charlottesville. "I thought I was experimenting with my body, you know? But it was bigger than I thought it was."

One day, her mother intervened. "I've hired a team of doctors," she said, "and you're going." Peach met regularly with a dietician, a physician and a therapist at a Charlottesville treatment center. Gradually, she came to understand the difference between sensible exercise and putting your life in jeopardy.

Today, at a healthy 158 pounds, she's a fitness trainer in Palo Alto, Calif.

"I try to lift twice a week and do cardio workouts, maybe 40 minutes or so, three days a week," said Friedman, now 26. "My boyfriend and I just climbed Mount Whitney (in California) and I'm pretty psyched

interactive stuff. I ski, I play tennis, I hike. It's less about punishment and clocking hours at the gym.

"I think that variety is a testament to my health now. I don't have a routine that I'm glued to. And right now, I'm telling myself that I'm not going to work out for a week. I know it's OK to take some time and just sleep a lot, eat a lot, watch a lot of movies and just let my body rest."

#### "AN ORPHAN DISEASE"

There is little research on exercise bulimia (or anorexia athletica, as another form of it is called), so it's difficult to know how many are afflicted. Dishman described it as "an orphan disease" — that is, it affects so few that it isn't officially recognized by the medical field. But Cumella says it's very real and very dangerous.

"More than half our patients are abusing exercise," he said. "And eating-disorder patients who also have exercise addictions have the highest death rates. They are undernourished and overactive, so their heart rate drops because of all of the conditioning. And at some point, literally, they drop dead."

Fortunately, Peach Friedman got help before it was too late. And by speaking publicly about her struggle — she was featured in People Magazine last spring and is writing a book about her recovery — she hopes to spread the word.

"One of the keys is your motivation," she said. "If you're going to your workout every day like it's drudgery and if it feels like punishment, that's a problem. When I was sick, my motivation was 'I have to do this because I have to be thin and I'm going to feel like a bad person if I don't.' I was basically staying off guilt, and that's a bad motivation. My motivation now is totally different. It's about enjoying my body, it's about feeling the pleasure of movement."

"It's pretty easy to identify someone who's over-exercising. You see young girls who are way too thin and are on the cardio equipment when you get there, and they're still there on the same machine when you leave an hour later. It's important to remember that it's an addiction in the true sense of

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# It can be a healthy addiction

addiction doesn't get much attention from the media or academic world. Rod Dishman, an exercise scientist at the University of Georgia, called it "a tiny issue." Yet when dedication becomes obsession, it can disrupt — or even damage — lives. In its most severe form, excessive exercise can lower a person's heartbeat to the point where it literally stops.

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