

Runners more prone to leg injuries than triathletes

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By Lee Hui Chieh

Avid marathon runner Charles Wu, 56, underwent a knee operation in 1999, but he continues to run about 40km a week, despite the risk of injury.



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LONG-DISTANCE runners are three times more likely than triathletes - who run, swim and cycle - to injure their legs, a study here has found.

This is probably because long-distance runners focus on pounding the pavement and chalk up much more 'mileage' each week than triathletes, said the study's author, Dr Kevin Lee.

The news comes as an increasing number of Singaporeans take up long-distance running. For example, this year's Singapore Marathon saw a record 50,000 participants, up from 40,000 last year. Of the 50,000, more than 15,000 ran the full 42km distance.

The study also found that those who ran more than 10km weekly were almost twice as likely to suffer leg injuries than those who ran shorter distances.

It did not matter how long the runner spent warming up, how often he ran, or how many years he had been running.

Dr Lee, 36, a consultant with the National University Hospital's division of adult reconstructive surgery, did the study to identify the common injuries and the risk factors associated with running.

With the help of a medical student and a biostatistician, he surveyed just over 500 runners who have covered at least 5km a week for at least five years. They were aged between 15 and 65, and most of them were men.

One in three had leg injuries, mainly sprains, strains, and tears to the cartilage and the central ligament of the knee.

For almost one in 10 of those injured, the injuries were serious enough to require surgery.

The study also found that being female and running on uneven surfaces, such as park trails, increased the risk of leg injury by almost twofold.

The relatively wider hips of women result in a greater force at the knees, making them more likely to twist, Dr Lee said.

Based on the results, those running purely to keep fit should run less than 10km a week, on level ground, to reduce their risk of getting injured, he advised.

Women, and those for whom reducing running distance is not an option, can do exercises to strengthen the thigh and knee muscles, he added.

Mr Charles Wu, 56, a senior medical technologist, has been running regularly for the past 33 years. He has completed more than 40 marathons and finished an 84km ultra-marathon in May.

Since a knee operation in 1999, he has halved the distance he runs every week, to about 40km. But despite the risk of injury, he cannot run less because he finds it addictive and says it helps him relieve stress and keep trim.

He said: 'I think the benefits outweigh the risk of injury.'