

NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.

Should You Take a Break From Training?



Your body wants you to. Your coach wants you to. Your husband/wife/dog/iguana want you to. But for some reason, you don't want to.

We're talking, of course, about taking a break from training in the offseason.

For some people, it's scary because they don't know what to do with that extra time, and it feels lazy to stop training. Others fear the slow creep of weight gain after they've hung up their running shoes for a few weeks. Others are afraid if they stop training, they might not start again. And some—and these are the ones who may want to seek professional help—are afraid of plunging into a depression, or they use training as an avoidance mechanism.

And for some people, training outside in the offseason is impossible, so the idea of taking a break is actually a huge relief. Those in northern climates can rejoice when the snow starts to pile up: You don't have to log endless hours on the treadmill or on the trainer—at least not for a couple of weeks.

Everyone needs an offseason. Sure, you might not train like a pro racer does, and your total mileage in a month might represent what a pro would do in a week. But you have a job, possibly a family or other social obligations, and frankly, you can use a break just as much as a pro can. For you, it might be more about the mental benefit, but there are certainly physical benefits too.

From the mental side of things, a break—just a couple of weeks—can help you feel fresher and more motivated to get back to training. It's like the old adage: You don't know what you have until it's gone. If you never stop training, you might never realize just how important it is to you, and how much more alert, alive and fresh a good run makes you feel. This break from training can show you. It also gives you time to focus on the other relationships in your life, and some critical space to step back and think about what you're trying to accomplish with training.

Physically, while your body may not be as beat up as a pro's will be after a long season, you may have some small injuries that are just waiting for a good chance to repair. Your body may have more inflammation than is healthy. You might also be a little bit fatigued. Two weeks off from training may save your next season—and save your sanity in the process! Here are answers to the most frequently asked questions for taking time off:

1. How do you decide how long to take off?

Most people will opt for around two weeks, but if the season has really beat you up and you're injured, you might need longer. If you work with a coach, ask him or her how long makes sense, and plan it into your schedule accordingly. Some coaches are scared to tell someone to take two weeks off for fear of losing a client, but if your coach hasn't slated any off time in your schedule, it's worth asking if a break makes sense for you.

2. What should you do during those weeks off?

Start with your body: Have you had a nagging pain in your left ankle for the whole season, a gut problem that's sent you behind trees mid-run, or a kink in your shoulder that won't work itself out? Take these weeks to go to a doctor for your yearly physical and to discuss any small or large problems you've had over the last season. Book a massage or a chiropractor appointment, or even a private yoga class where the teacher will focus on showing you how to stretch those ultra-tensed places.

Also use this time to dial in your sleep—as in, make sure you're getting enough, ideally at least eight hours per night. Now that you have some extra time, play around with new recipes and make sure you're eating nutrient-dense foods (think: leafy greens, tons of veggies and properly-portioned servings of lean meat).

It's a good chance to get ahead too: make a big batch of fresh tomato sauce or some veggie stews, and freeze them so you have easy instant meals when training ramps up again. And while it's tempting to go off the rails and start eating a bunch of junk food you've been depriving yourself of during training, don't even think about it. If anything, these two weeks should be the healthiest, cleanest eating you've done all year, since you won't be using as many calories in day-to-day life.

3. OK, I've done all of the above ... now what?

From a practical perspective, you've just opened up somewhere between seven and 40 hours of your next two weeks. If you have a lot of obligations that have stacked up: chores at home, promises to the husband and kids, projects you've been meaning to tackle, now is the time to do them, guilt-free. Take a couple weeks and spend those days cleaning the basement, organizing your scrapbook, decluttering your kitchen—all the things you didn't do because you were training.

These couple of weeks are also a chance for you to take stock of your training. First, look at your gear: Chuck old running shoes and tights that are falling apart. Spend some of those training hours you now have free researching a new headlamp or dialing in your bike. This is the perfect time to take your bike to a shop for new cables and a general overhaul, since you won't miss it.

It's also a good chance to look at the calendar for 2016 and start planning out your key goals and races for the season. Now that you have a bit of distance from training, you can look back critically on the last year and think about what worked and what didn't. Write some of those notes down so you remember them later, or make sure you share with your coach how much you hated that certain interval set.

4. What if I can't sit still?

This is a chance to have some fun: Play with your kids (or borrow some from a neighbor or your sister) and get outside with them to enjoy the winter season. If you do have snow, consider going skiing or snowboarding, or go on a casual cross country ski or snowshoe. But don't get up to a speed where it's a workout—just keep a leisurely pace. If you're in a warmer climate and snow sports aren't an option, walks and chill hikes are a great way to keep blood flowing and get out in nature without "training." Enlist a couple of your less-fit friends to walk or hike with you to keep the pace down and hopefully come away from the two weeks with new fitness converts!

Enjoy these two weeks, don't dread them. When the time is up and you get back into training, if you're not working with a coach to guide your progress, don't forget to "reverse taper" back into running or riding again. Start with some easier, slower runs and slowly ramp back up. Don't go out and do brutal intervals your first day back on your feet. Time off won't have dulled your fitness much, but you don't want to shock your body. Lastly, when you do hit the pavement or trail again, take a few deep breaths as you start out and appreciate just how good running or riding again feels.

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