

Vic's Fit Tip

Happy New Year everyone! We hope you managed to enjoy your holiday festivities and that Santa was good to you and yours. No doubt many runners received a heart rate monitor (HRM) for Christmas, or maybe you have resolved to dust off the one sitting in your drawer since last year. At any rate, your HRM can be your best training partner and can lead you to train smarter, not harder. How does it work? Are they accurate? How can you make the best use of an HRM? Let's learn a little more about what your HRM can do for you, if you use it correctly.

The most common HRM systems use a strap-on transmitter that fits around your chest. This is the part that listens to your heart and transmits your heart rate to your monitor or watch which displays it for you. This type of system is about as accurate as an electrocardiogram, so it is accurate enough for medical use. Can't you just count beats on your pulse? True, the pulse is also accurate, but it works best for your resting heart rate, and is far less convenient when you are in the middle of a race or a workout. If you try to find your pulse, hold it for 15 seconds, count the beats and time the 15 seconds accurately while running, you will immediately appreciate the HRM digital readout! The HRM is so easy to use, easy to read and so accurate, it just makes sense to use it.

The one step you really need to take in order to get the most out of your HRM is to determine your maximum heart rate. There are charts and graphs that tell you to subtract your age from 220, or some other number and look at a range for your fitness level, but this is inadequate. Once your fitness level has risen a couple of notches above that of the average couch potato and you are looking to maximize your gains in minimum time, you need to have personal information. Your personal max. heart rate is not found on any graph, you must have a fitness test, with your HRM to determine it. You can check the instruction manual that came with your HRM for instructions on how to do this, but the best thing you can do is work with a partner or fitness trainer. You will need accurate timing, and you will need to repeat the test a few times to get a measure of your max heart rate. Once you have the number nailed down, you can then develop your training program tailored exactly for you, and your current level of fitness.

What do you do with your HRM data? Once you have established your max HR and a resting HR, these baselines will give you invaluable information. When you run according to your mile or km pace, it is difficult to make adjustments for changing conditions. Hot weather, hills, changes in altitude, even what you eat will affect your heart rate, and can make you work harder without realizing you are doing so. Many runners do their easy runs too fast. This defeats the purpose of the easy days which is to aid your recovery from your hard days, not hinder your recovery! Similarly, many runners go too fast on their long runs just because it feels good. However, this can delay your recovery and will not only affect the quality of the next workout, but will almost certainly lead to injury. All these problems (conditions, diet, pacing) can be alleviated by using your HRM. By keeping track of your heart rate, you will know when you have recovered from a workout so that you are ready for the next workout and therefore ready to get the most out of it.

Using your HRM is as easy as reading the numbers. If your workout says your target heart rate is 65%, then that is the level of intensity you maintain for that workout. If the weather is hotter than normal and your HR is elevated, it doesn't matter! Just reach your target HR and stay there, don't worry if the pace is slower than you expect. If you have added a couple of % body fat over the holidays, and your HR is elevated, again you don't have to worry about how far off your pace you need to be to compensate, just hit your target HR. If your buddies are picking up the pace in the last couple miles of your long run trying to turn it into a tempo, don't fall for it, stick to your target HR for that workout and you will be the one who is recovered in time for the next workout, while your buddies will be dragging their heels.

Put that heart rate monitor to good use- wear it, work with a trainer to determine your maximum heart rate, and then develop a training schedule based on HR rather than pace per km or pace per mile. You will recover faster, and you will avoid over-training as you prepare for another exciting season on the roads.