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7 steps to survive a triathlon

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Sports doctors give advice on how to train for a gruelling triathlon

LAST weekend, a marketing manager drowned while taking part in a triathlon.

The 40-year-old computer company manager, Mr Ho Wai Piew, drowned in the swimming leg of the New Balance Corporate Triathlon held at East Coast Park.

By all accounts, he was a seasoned triathlete and was said to be in the pink of health.

For many triathletes and non-triathletes, the incident has raised a crucial question: Can triathlons kill?

The triathlon organisers insisted it was an unfortunate incident - the first time in more than 20 years that such a tragedy has struck.

According to the Triathlon Association of Singapore (TAS), there have been 12 public triathlon races in Singapore this year alone. The number does not include small-scale, unregistered private races organised by private groups.

TAS said the number of participants racing in public triathlons range from below 200 to more than 3,000, such as in the Osim-sponsored race in July this year.

Experts say it is foolhardy to take part in these events without adequate training and preparation.

Sports physicians Dr Ben Tan and Dr Jason Chia from Changi General Hospital outline seven useful steps for all who are thinking of taking part in triathlons and other endurance events.

Step 1: Get a thorough health check

THOROUGH medical screenings may be costly but they help capture more medical problems, said Dr Tan.

They are recommended for those who have a medical history or whose family has a track record of certain common illnesses.

Some of the more important health ailments to look out for are high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes and cancer.

Regular health checks are especially important for female triathletes who, unlike men, do not attend national service and are not given the mandatory check-ups.

'If you are not keen on spending a bomb on a thorough health check, then opt for a selective screening,' said Dr Tan.

Selective screenings would involve doing checks on certain areas only, such as the heart.

Step 2: Train progressively

THE intensity of your training will depend on your personal target for the race.

Are you planning to just complete the race or do you plan to beat a certain time? Generally, an average triathlete will need to train a minimum of six to nine months before the race, said Dr Tan. He added that the intensity of the training sessions should be increased progressively.

Dr Tan said that triathletes need to make sure they are comfortable completing the actual triathlon distances before the race.

'Before the race, you must already know what your race pace is going to be and you must have already achieved this pace during practice sessions,' he said.

'Your pace must be realistic. The problem is most people are too ambitious.'

Although the running leg may be the most strenuous, both doctors agreed that the swimming leg of a triathlon is the most challenging.

The waves, currents and swimming in open waters crowded with hundreds of participants can be very disorienting, especially if a triathlete has been practising in a pool. Training in the sea is necessary.

Step 3: Prepare a race plan

A TRIATHLON is not just about being able to run, swim and cycle continuously.

Many details have to be thought out seriously before the race. How much water are you going to carry? How much are you going to drink? Will you be drinking plain water or sports drinks? When will you drink? Will you be eating during the race?

These are some issues a triathlete has to plan way before the race.

'The best time to drink will be while cycling. So stock up drink bottles on the bicycle,' said Dr Chia. He recommends sports drinks which help to quickly replenish lost glucose and salts as well as carbohydrate gels which are easily consumed.

Step 4: Practise race transitions

PRACTISING how to dismount from a bicycle gracefully sounds silly but it is no joke when your body is tired and your legs go wobbly.

It is important to plan your race transitions so that there will be no confusion in the race.

Lay out your equipment and make sure you can identify them easily.

'Attending pre-race briefings and knowing where you're supposed to enter and exit on the bike can help avoid confusion and bike accidents,' Dr Chia said.

Having a change of shoes is also crucial if you're swimming and running, said Dr Tan.

'Running with sand in your shoes will give blisters,' he said.

Step 5: Check your equipment

ALTHOUGH some races make checks on race equipment mandatory, take responsibility for equipment maintenance, said Dr Chia.

Be fussy about little details: Are your bicycle brakes working? Is your helmet the right size? These little details can possibly save your life on the day of the race.

Step 6: Rest for a few days

GIVING your body some rest before the day of the race is extremely important.

Some triathletes stop training two weeks before the race, while others rest for only three days. Determine how much rest your body needs to fully recover so that you can be in top form for the race.

'One mistake is to train until the last minute,' said Dr Tan. 'There is no point as your fitness can't improve in a few days. But with sufficient rest, much fatigue can be removed.'

Step 7: D-Day preparations

ON THE day of the race, never skip your breakfast, said Dr Tan, but don't have too heavy a breakfast either.

Your meal should ideally be three to four hours before the race and should be rich in carbohydrates and low in fibre.

This will give you less chances of getting stitches or stomach discomforts during the race. Also, don't forget to drink enough water to stay hydrated.

While racing, pay attention to your body signals.

'Some tell-tale signs are unusual breathlessness, chest pains and nausea,' said Dr Chia. 'If you experience any of these signs in the water, stop immediately and wave for help,' he said.

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