

Exercise addiction is a health threat

There's no bigger proponent of exercise than Kelly Wojtowicz. For some 20 years, the registered nurse and certified personal trainer has devoted herself to helping others get in shape and develop healthy lifestyles.

But there comes a point when some people overdo it, Ms. Wojtowicz warned. When a person's life begins to revolve around exercise and when he or she ignores pain or injuries while working out, it may be a warning sign of an addiction, she said.

"There's nothing wrong with exercising every day if you do it in the right way," said Ms. Wojtowicz, group fitness director at the Big Vanilla health club in Arnold and a parishioner of Our Lady of Sorrows, Centerville.

A good regimen might include alternating muscle groups by day or rotating between cardiovascular and strength training sessions, she said.

"It's when people start exercising two or three hours a day, often doing extreme forms of exercise, when it becomes more of an obsession," she said. "Typically there's something else going on and they think this is something they can have control over."

Addiction to exercise is often associated with eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia, Ms. Wojtowicz explained. Most of the cases she has seen have involved young women who think they will gain weight if they stop exercising compulsively.

Pushing oneself so hard, especially when not getting the proper amount of daily calories, can be dangerous.

"You could break down the muscle if you're not eating enough," Ms. Wojtowicz said. "If all the body fat is used up for energy, then the body will start to break down muscle for energy."

People who exercise too much often suffer from overtraining injuries, she said. The body needs rest time to repair muscles, according to Ms. Wojtowicz. It normally takes about 24 hours to recover from a challenging workout, she said.

“You really have to listen to your body,” she said. “If you have aches and pains, you have to be willing to rest. It’s not healthy to push the body past its limit.”

Dehydration is another potential problem area for those who are exercising heavily without eating and drinking properly. There is a risk of passing out if a person exercises while dehydrated. Ms. Wojtowicz said it’s important to drink 64 ounces of water a day.

Those who think they might have an addiction to exercise should seek professional help, Ms. Wojtowicz said.