

Chicago Tribune

Marathons: Good or bad for your health?

Marathon deaths are rare, but when they happen, it's easy to blame the grueling 26.2-mile distance.

After all, the first marathoner, Pheidippides, supposedly dropped dead immediately after running 25 miles to deliver news of a battle victory.

And studies have shown that pushing your body that far doesn't just increase your risk of getting sick the week after the race; it can cause minor injury to the heart.

But while the three runners who died in Sunday's Detroit Free Press Marathon were all reportedly trained, they were running the shorter, 13.1-mile half marathon, not the full 26.2-mile race, according to news reports.

So what's going on? Cardiac arrest is suspected in the case of the Detroit runners, but we'll know more after today's autopsies.

Meanwhile, marathoners can lower their risk of heart trouble by putting in at least 45 miles a week of training, according to this Men's Health article.

The risk of heart trouble increases when you line up at the marathon's starting line, wrote Tom McGrath.

*"Marathon running may be regarded as a dose of exercise that pushes you past the zone of cardioprotective benefit into one of enhanced risk," **Dr. Arthur Siegel, director of internal medicine at Harvard's McLean Hospital,** told McGrath.*

Siegel, a former marathoner who researches the health consequences of the race, says the smartest thing to do is to complete the training and then watch from the sidelines.

That's not much fun. And it's not likely to happen very often, given that a marathon provides a much needed goal and a thrilling sense of accomplishment when it's over.

So do the next best thing: Respect the distance. Marathons are an extreme event, no matter how popular they get. Clear the marathon with your doctor if you have any underlying health issues and get at least 45 miles of training a week. If that feels like too much, maybe try another impressive event, such as biking a half century or an Olympic-distance triathlon.