



Athletes hope stockings can improve blood flow

If your excuse for not exercising is sore muscles, then Kona Ironman athletes might have a solution for you. Ultra-athletes recently have been seen wearing knee-high elastic compression stockings. These stockings are similar to hosiery worn for medical purposes used to improve blood circulation.

A variety of medical conditions can result in problems with veins returning blood properly up the legs. Conditions commonly treated with compression include varicose veins, lower leg edema and blood clots in the leg. The stockings do not eliminate varicose veins or other vein problems, but they do help to reduce the swelling, aching and feelings of heaviness that individuals with serious varicose veins can experience.

Question: Why are athletes wearing support hose?

Answer: Ironman athletes claim that the stockings enhance their performance and recovery from exercise.

Q: How do compression stockings help recovery?

A: Compression stockings are designed to assist blood flow out of the lower legs in people with normal or impaired blood circulation.

When the veins in the calf are not working well, fluid can collect in body tissues and cause edema, swelling from fluid accumulation. This, in turn, can cause muscle soreness. The gentle pressure of compression stockings combined with leg muscle activity is thought to assist the flow of tissue fluid and blood into deep veins and enhance blood flow up the limb.

Q: What evidence supports the use of compression stockings by athletes?

A: There is certainly some scientific support and plenty of athlete testimonials that tout the benefits of compression stocking use in sports. But, since elite athletes have healthy blood vessels, it might seem surprising that compression stockings could provide any benefit.

However, some studies have reported that wearing compression stockings during exercise enhances blood flow to and from the lower leg and enhances the performance of some types of exercise. Although several studies have reported no performance benefit from compression stockings, these studies frequently reported that athletes experienced reduced mus-

cle soreness and recovered from exercise more quickly.

Q: Will high-tech hosiery make the difference between you winning or losing a race?

A: Based on this year's Kona Ironman, apparently not. Male and female winners were not wearing them.

Q: Are there other uses of compression stockings?

A: The use of compression stockings by elite athletes has piqued a growing interest in further research on their potential benefits in and out of the sport. Another use of compression stockings could be to decrease the risk of blood clot formation during air travel. Research supports the use of compression stockings during long plane rides to decrease the probability of blood clot formation.

Q: Will compression hose become the next fitness fashion statement?

A: The stockings do come in a variety of types and are designed to provide variable levels of compression. With regards to a fashion statement, the jury is still out.

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
