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FootNotes

Rubbed the wrong way

by Mindy Solkin

It's a subject in the running community that is rarely discussed. You're halfway through a race, the weather is hot and humid, and all of your 600-plus muscles and 200-plus bones are feeling fine.

Then all of a sudden you feel it. Your pace may be on fire, but so is your skin. While your feet are hitting the ground approximately 1,000 steps in a mile, so, too, must your arms be swinging back and forth that many times. And with each arm swing your upper arm rubs against the side of your body, causing friction, which in turn causes chafing. "The burn" can also affect the inner thighs, the feet (causing blisters, too), the skin under elastic waistbands and sports bras, and men's nipples.

The burn affected me at mile 17 of the Boston Marathon. Fortunately, there were spectators offering petroleum jelly on popsicle sticks. Ah, relief. There was a time when this was the only way to stave off the burn. However, today there are several products on the market that address this issue. Call them ChapSticks for your body, these soothing lubricants — BodyGlide, Runner's Lube, Sportsloob, and SportSlick — all claim to protect against chafed skin and prevent blisters, a runner's foe.

Sportsloob and SportSlick are gel-like substances that come in a tube. They are squeezed onto your fingers, then applied to the soon-to-be-affected area. BodyGlide and Runner's Lube are the consistency of, and are applied like, a stick deodorant. Your fingers thus don't touch the product.

As a running coach in New York City, I was able to have some of my runners perform a field test by using a different product each day and then answering a questionnaire. We included petroleum jelly in the test to find out if these "high-tech" products were really worth their salt.

THE FIELD TEST

The following questions were asked about each product:

Effectiveness — Did the product prevent blisters and chafing, and did it stay on during the duration of the run?

Application — Was the product easy to apply?

Smell — Did the product smell pleasant, offensive, or not at all?

Feel — How did the product feel?

Removal — Did the product wash off easily with soap and water? Did the product stain or damage clothing?

THE COMMENTS

The products were tested during 5- to 10-mile runs. Longer training runs and races might lead to different answers.

All of the products prevented chafing and blisters, and most of them stayed on during the entire run.

The ease of application of BodyGlide and Runner's Lube was preferred since you don't have to wash your hands after applying. (Something to think about for use right before a race.) Sportsloob's tube was a bit too small, prompting the user to squeeze out too much or too little. Petroleum jelly was the least preferred — a greasy mess. One tester called it "medieval and barbaric."

All of the lubricants removed easily with soap and water, although Sportsloob and SportSlick took a little longer. Petroleum jelly was the hardest to remove.

There were several opinions about the smell of the products. One tester said that SportSlick had a nice, tropical smell but preferred the "good, clean, non-fragrance" of BodyGlide. Another thought that BodyGlide smelled medicinal.

The chart below provides general information about each lubricant and details unique features. The runners had fun trying all of the products, and all agreed that if they were feeling the burn at mile 17 of a marathon, they would gladly accept any of them. As with any new product that you put in or on your body, test it in training before you use it in a race.

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