

Damien Howell Physical Therapy

Mugged – Smacked and Common Sense: Exercise In Dark Outdoors

The short dark day of winter pose a challenge for the exercise enthusiast who prefers to exercise out doors. Most everyone has some fear walking/running in the dark. There are justifiable concerns related to safety. On the positive side there can be significant benefits and rewards from getting outside in the dark winter days and going for a walk, jog, run, or bike ride.

The two most common concerns expressed regarding exercising in the dark is getting mugged or getting smacked. Getting mugged or harassed is a significant concern for females. Getting smacked by a car, bicycle, or tripping and smacking the ground are significant concerns for both males and females.

A search for data regarding the risk of injury when walking/running in the dark finds very little data. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) collects data on injuries. For the year 2000 for females of all ages, a female is 15 times more likely to get injured falling than she is to be in a motor vehicle accident, and 800 times more likely to get injured in a fall than by a sexual assault. The CDC does not track data on whether injury occurs in the dark or daylight, or whether the injury occurred when exercising.

The statistics suggest fear of falling is a valid concern, and that strategies need to be developed to prevent falls. Use of a flashlight to increase visibility is an obvious strategy. A miner's headlight works well when walking/running. Small lightweight flashlights attached to a headband are readily available on the Internet, at running/biking stores, and at hardware stores. This device can illuminate the tree branches and pot holes, which lead to falls, and smacking the ground. Automobile drivers and bicyclists can see miner's headlights. Having your own light source is safer than depending on reflective material. Reflective material only works if there is a light source. Other walkers/runners, and bicyclists may not have a light source needed to illuminate reflective material. I have never been smacked by a vehicle, however before I started using a headlight, I had been smacked by a bicycle with no lights on several occasions.

A survey conducted by a woman's running club concluded that daylight does not guarantee safety for females. More threats toward females were reported during daylight hours.

Common sense tips for females is to walk/run with a partner, ignore verbal harassment, carry noise maker, pepper spray, or cell phone; alter/vary your route and time of walking/running; avoid unpopulated areas deserted streets, and overgrown trails. Do not wear headphones. Stay alert, carry identification, and trust your intuition about persons or an area. More likely bad guys are out in the dark of evening/night time, rather than the dark of early morning.

A medico-legal case is recorded in a peer-reviewed literature in which a vehicle hit a jogger. The driver of the vehicle argued the runner was addicted to running and was in an altered state of consciousness when he ran in front of his vehicle. Despite the apparent silliness of this defense it does speak to the fact that walkers/runners need to stay alert.

A recent tactic that I observed, while running at dusk occurred as I followed a female runner on to the start of the trail on Belle Island she quickly reversed direction and started running back towards me. She startled me. Apparently, this lady thought I looked like a potential low-life bad guy.

A female friend who is an investment banker in Manhattan who runs on a regular basis uses a distinctive strategy to deal with bad guys. As an investment banker she routinely dresses smartly. However when running she purposely dresses down, and as she approaches potential bad guys when running she will blow her nose without a tissue, with all the skill, grace, and vigor you would expect from a construction worker. Her strategy is to make herself unappealing to bad guys, slugs, and low lives.

For a female walking/running in dark there is risk of getting mugged or falling and smacking the ground. One could argue to avoid getting harassed or mugged by bad guys to dress like a stealth commando in order to avoid detection. However in order to avoid falling or being hit by a vehicle it is better to dress like a Christmas tree with miner's headlight on top. Obviously there is a greater probability of getting smacked than mugged so dress like a Christmas tree and use multiple common sense tactics to avoid getting harassed or mugged. Don't let fear of the dark stop you from enjoying the joys of exercising outside.