

## □ 'ADDICTION' TO EXERCISE □

**E**xercise is definitely better for you than a cigarette, a dry martini or a line of cocaine, but a researcher says, too much of it can have the same result: addiction.

Connie S. Chan, a clinical psychologist and amateur athlete, interviewed patients at Boston-area sports medicine clinics and reviewed research on the role of exercise in the release of pleasure-causing chemicals in the brain.

The report by Chan, assistant professor of human services at Boston University, was published in the 1987 *Medical and Health Annual*, released by the Chicago-based Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.

"The push for more mileage, more strenuous and more frequent workouts, and more time devoted to exercise meant that athletes who started out as recreational exercisers became overly dependent upon, or in fact 'addicted' to, exercise," Chan wrote.

"Even two days away from exercise can affect addicts psychologically," she said.

"They start experiencing guilt, depression, irritability, moodiness and anxiety. Longer periods produce major symptoms of withdrawal. In extreme cases, where major injuries keep compulsive athletes from their sports for two or three months, they may even turn anorexic or bulimic."

**Addiction can occur in any strenuous sport,** Chan said in a telephone interview. But it is most common among those who participate in aerobic endurance sports: runners, swimmers, bicyclists, triathletes and aerobic dancers.

"With certain personality types, exercise begins as a weight or stress



*They say it's better than cocaine...*

management technique, but instead of becoming an enhancement of their life, or a means to an end, it becomes an end in itself," she said. "Instead of it becoming a stress reducer, it becomes another stress."

Addicted athletes, she said, often feel the need to exercise vigorously five or more times a week and to cover greater and greater distances. By doing so, they tend to become injured more often than other athletes, and when they are prevented from exercising — usually by injury — they exhibit signs of psychological and physical withdrawal.

Chan estimated that 50 percent to 75 percent of people who exercise five or more times a week could be considered addicts.

She warned, though, that her sampling was drawn from the patients of sports medicine clinics, who often have already injured themselves through overexercise and, therefore, may not be truly representative of amateur athletes as a class.

**Some of the addictive force of exercise can be attributed to morphine-like chemicals released by the brain during violent physical activity.**

The chemicals known as beta-endorphins are believed to cause the "runner's high", and some theorists believe that the more physically fit a person becomes, the harder that person must exercise to stimulate the release by the brain, she said.

Often, addicted athletes go so hard, so fast or so far that their feet and joints can't take the stress, Chan said. In other cases, they devote so much time to their obsessive pursuit of exercise that their jobs and personal relationships suffer through becoming secondary concerns.

Chan, a runner and a triathlete, doesn't suggest giving up exercise, but recommends that obsessive athletes cut back on their hours of exercise per week and try to become proficient in some sport other than their preferred one before they are injured □

*(Excerpted from Associated Press.)*