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Determinants of recovery behaviours in Olympic swimmers: A qualitative investigation using the Reasoned Action Approach

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Background

An adequate management of training and recovery allows swimmers to continuously achieve high performance and avoid illness and injuries. In the few weeks prior the Olympics Games, swimmers have a taper phase of training, during which recovery is one of the most important factors to reduce the cumulative training-induced fatigue and improve performance. Although swimmers' recovery behaviours have been recently described, the barriers and levers for their adoption have not been studied based on behaviour change theories. Using the reasoned action approach, we aimed to explore the sociocognitive determinants of swimmer's recovery behaviours.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the determinants of the adoption of recovery strategies. 14 French swimmers were interviewed among the 42 eligible swimmers who participated in the Summer Olympic Games in 2012, 2016, and/or 2021. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The main themes and codes were first generated inductively and then mapped to the Reasoned Action Approach.

Results

Swimmers reported a daily use the bedrock of recovery (sleep, hydration, nutrition) and adopting various recovery routines. The number and variety of recovery techniques adopted were higher among swimmers who participated in Tokyo 2020. Despite negative attitudes (e.g. painful, unpleasant) reported towards the adoption of some recovery techniques, this does not prevent swimmers from considering that recovery is efficient and necessary to optimize subsequent training or competition. The approval of swimmer's coaches was reported to be important and positively influencing the adoption of recovery strategies. Access to recovery equipment or resources was seen as both a barrier and an enabler as swimmers have access to a physiotherapist but had to adapt to their availability and get to their office. Swimmers describe that knowledge and perceived effectiveness of a recovery technique strongly influenced its adoption.

Discussion

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews provided insight into the specific determinants of swimmer's recovery behaviours. The present study could be of interest when designing theory and evidence-based behaviour change interventions to improve elite swimmers' adoption of recovery strategies. For example, targeted interventions for swimmers could include monitoring of swimmers recovery behaviours combined with feedbacks on performance self-efficacy or self-reported measures of perceptual recovery outcomes.

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