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## Injured athletes run on air

### NASA device helps racers recover from sore joints and muscles.

By Melissa Evans, Staff Writer  
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Each year, Craig Cooper typically competes in a half-dozen triathlons, with a few 10Ks mixed in for fun.

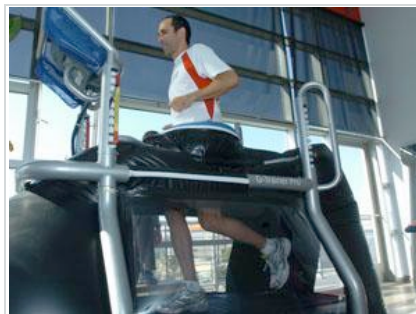
The constant pounding on his legs and ligaments has taken a toll, says the 42-year-old.

"This year," Cooper said, "I did three races in an 11-week period," including the Hermosa Beach triathlon. "My legs were dead."

Cooper and other racers, particularly those suffering injuries, have a new tool to get in shape for distance running and recover from high-stress activities.

For the first time, an odd-looking machine called the Alter-G, an anti-gravity treadmill, is available to the public at a Playa Vista rehabilitation facility.

Developed by NASA to help astronauts stay in shape, the machine



Triathlete Craig Cooper swears by the effectiveness of Alter-G, a rehabilitation treadmill that helps injured athletes recover from joint and muscle strain. The NASA-developed device uses a bag of air to reduce the weight an athlete places on his legs while on the treadmill. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

has so far been used commercially only by professional athletes.

Owners of Evolution Physical Therapy, became the first in Southern California to offer the \$75,000 machine for its clients and the public.

"This is going to be the next big thing in physical therapy and training," said Darwin Fogt, president of the facility. "There is nothing else like it."

The machine looks like a treadmill with a giant parachute plopped in the center.

During a recent training session, Cooper demonstrated how the machine works, first slipping on a pair of specially designed bike shorts with a zipper-lined flap at the top.

He stepped inside the small opening at the top of the treadmill and zipped himself into the



Craig Cooper slides on the shorts that are fastened to the Alter-G's inflated bag during a rehab session. The bag lifts the 42-year-old while running on the treadmill, which can be used by the public for the first time at a Playa Vista facility. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

parachute-like bag, creating an air-tight seal below his waist.

A compressor then filled the space with air, blowing up the bag with enough pressure to take varying levels of body weight off of his feet and legs.

The level of air can be adjusted to take as much 80 percent of a person's body weight off their feet.

"Each step feels a lot lighter, like you're floating on air," Hooper said.

Rehabilitation for joints and strained muscles usually takes place in a swimming pool, which has the same effect of taking body weight off the injury.

"The drawback is, you don't get the same range of motion in water," Fogt said. "It's too much resistance."

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The Menlo Park-based company that manufactures the Alter-G predicts rehabilitation time could be reduced to just a few weeks. Most of those who use the Alter-G are referred by orthopedic surgeons or podiatrists.

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Athletes also don't have to stop training while they are recovering, said Joanna Brody, a runner who has used the machine and works with Evolution.

"The downtime can make you crazy," she said.

Cooper, who has been using the machine since last September, hopes to improve his times when the running season picks back up in a few months.

"I already feel better," he said. "We'll see what happens."

[melissa.evans@dailybreeze.com](mailto:melissa.evans@dailybreeze.com)

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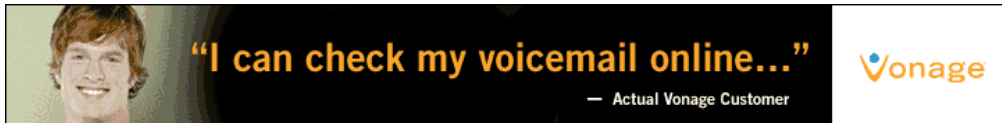
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