

New Runners

Why Run?

Running does wonders for your body. It boosts 'good' HDL cholesterol, conditions your heart and lowers your risk of certain types of cancer. But maybe you've heard all that. Here are some rather more surprising benefits:

- You'll stay warm in the winter. A Naval Medical Centre study of fit women found that they conserve heat better than overweight, unfit women.
- You'll get smarter. Your daily run may be all you need to beat your peers at Scrabble, chess or any other game that requires brainpower, according to a recent study from the *Journal of Ageing & Physical Activity*. In the study, men who were more physically fit performed better mentally than their less-fit peers.
- You'll prevent age-related disabilities. Researchers from Stanford University found that people who exercised, and who maintained a healthy weight and didn't smoke, were half as likely to become disabled by age 75 as those who didn't practise these habits.
- You'll improve your hearing. That's right, regular runs can even help your ears to survive a loud rock concert. Researchers from the University of Northern Iowa found that physically fit people recover their normal hearing faster after being exposed to loud noise than less physically fit people.
- You'll live longer. Finnish research shows that walking or jogging for 30 minutes or more six times a month can reduce your risk of premature death by more than 40 per cent.

All running programmes for beginners are the same: they move you from walking, which anyone can do, to running, which anyone can do if they have the determination.

The difference between walking and running isn't speed or biomechanics. It's determination.

If you have the determination to stick with a simple programme, you'll soon be a runner.

Mix running and walking

Few people can run a full mile the first time out the door, so don't even try. You'll get discouraged and quit. Instead, mix running and walking. Run for 30 seconds, walk for 90 seconds, and repeat this nine more times for a total of 20 minutes. When you can comfortably run/walk for 20 minutes four times a week with this 30/90-second pattern, change your run/walk ratio to 45/75 and repeat the four-times-a-week pattern. Next comes 60/60, then 75/45, then 90/30. Eventually you'll be running for several minutes at a time between walking breaks, and then – hallelujah! – you'll be able to run for 20 minutes without stopping.

Take the 'talk test'

Always run at a relaxed and comfortable pace. This isn't the Olympics – it's a lifelong fitness quest. To check your effort level, start a conversation with your training partner. You should be able to speak without gasping or feeling out of breath. If you can't, then slow down.

Go farther, not harder

Once you reach the magic 20-minute mark, build up to 30 minutes (then 40, 50 and 60). Don't make the mistake of trying to get faster – don't try to run your 20-minute course in 19 minutes. Increasing endurance is your first priority.

Be a tortoise, not a hare

We don't have to retell the old children's story here. Running works just like the tortoise-and-hare race. It rewards the patient (with weight loss, steady progress, less stress, more energy and a host of health benefits) and penalizes the overeager (with injuries, burnout and the like). This isn't a sport for sprinters. Be slow, not sorry.

Don't compare yourself with anyone else

Don't feel bad if you see someone who's faster, thinner or smoother-striding. Running is your activity – make it work for you, and don't worry about anyone else.

What time should I aim for?

If you're a complete beginner, start with conservative goals. To give yourself a ballpark 10K target, see how far you can run at a lively but sustainable pace in 15-20 minutes. Then get in the car or on your bike to measure the distance in miles, divide the time by the distance and multiply the result by 6.2 to get a rough figure for 10K. Be realistic though - don't run yourself into the ground for 20 minutes and expect that with a few weeks' training you'll be miraculously able to sustain that effort for two or three times as long on race day.

Experienced runners can try a more structured approach: if you can successfully run 5-6 x 1K or 3-4 x 1 mile at your target 10K pace with three-minute recoveries, then you should be able to hit your goal on race day. This is a good time trial to do before you start your 10K schedules, and when you're two-thirds of the way through them. Remember two things though:

- a) don't be discouraged by one unusually bad time trial - everyone has off-days;
- b) don't take your predicted time as gospel - you can often find an extra gear on race day, for instance.

Running Form

Complement your running with some conditioning-specific work. Focusing on core stability keeps the pelvic girdle and spine in perfect position to stop the pelvis tipping forward and prevents back ache and poor running form. Try toe touchdowns - lie on your back with knees bent and hands under your back. Contract your abs and press your back against your hands, then slowly lift one foot a few inches off the floor, pause and lower. Do the same with the other foot and continue this until you lose the pressure against your hands.

The late running philosopher Dr George Sheehan once noted that the only difference between a jogger and a runner was an entry form.

Race Day

Of course, you've trained solidly, practised your race pace, kept hydrated all weekend, had an early night and a good, tried-and-trusted breakfast... Here's what to do next to ensure race-day bliss...

Stick with what's familiar

Everything about your race should be as controlled as possible. An important event isn't the time for experiments. Make sure that the shoes you'll be racing in are comfortably worn in – the same goes for your vest, shorts and socks. Eat a familiar breakfast that you know you can run on, and if you're not sure about how early to eat it, do your experimenting well before race day (most runners need two to three hours).

Out on the course, play it safe if there are energy drinks at the feed stations. If energy drinks have a potential part in your race plan (they can be useful if you're running for 90 minutes or more), find out in advance what sort will be provided, and practise using them on training runs first.

Focus your mind

Prepare your mind to race. Clear your mind of bills, bank statements and other worries. During your training you should form a routine that prepares you to run; it could be stretching, sitting quietly or even chanting a song. Do exactly the same prior to your race. Then have a moment of quiet away from others and assess precisely what you want to achieve in this race, how you want to start off, and what pace you want to run. Be scientific with these thoughts. Do not take too long, otherwise negative thoughts may creep in. Then calmly walk to the start.

Start slowly and carefully

At the start, position yourself with people who appear to be of a similar ability to you. If you're a 10-minute miler and you start off with the five-minute milers you'll clog up the course and certainly set off faster than you should do. Experience will breed an instinct for where to position yourself.

At the gun, start moving as soon as you are able, flowing with the crowd until you can establish your own pace. Keep your hands up to maintain balance, keep your feet low to avoid tripping. If the race is not crowded resist the urge to sprint off at the start. It is easy to ruin a race by sprinting the first 200 metres.

Run an even pace

There are several ways to pace yourself in a race, but the method considered most effective is running at an even speed throughout. If, for example, you are aiming for eight-minute miling in a marathon, the first few miles will seem like a warm-up, but you should resist the temptation to speed up. Use a stopwatch and note the mile markers around the course to keep yourself on track. It can be worth aiming a little bit inside your target time when you calculate your pace plan – the only trouble with even pacing is that it doesn't allow you to build a cushion of time, so a lack of concentration can quickly put you behind your race pace.

Consider a negative split

Another method is to start the race slowly, gradually pick up the pace, and finish fast. This is best for novices and those runners returning to races after a lay-off, and research suggests that a slower first half (a 'negative split') is the best route to a successful marathon. Many runners run better when they can get warmed up first with an easier pace, and pick up confidence as they start to overtake runners after a few miles. This may be the only choice in a mass-participation event like the Bristol 10km or half marathon.

Accelerate late

You're feeling good, you're running briskly but within your limits – so when should you put the pedal to the metal? In a 10K, wait until you've covered five miles before hitting the accelerator, or four and a half if you're really feeling good. In a half-marathon you can gradually step up your speed after eight miles or so. In a marathon, wait until the last two or three miles. If the race feels tough throughout, save your surge for the final 800-1200 metres, a short enough distance for a little mental toughness to be able to help you deal with a lake of lactic acid in your leg muscles.

Learn from poor performances as well as good ones

You may train and plan to have the race of your life but sometimes it's just not your day. If you do have a disaster, don't dwell on it. Give yourself an hour to be upset, but during that time try to analyse what went wrong.

