

Smart Running New Year's Resolutions

7 Healthy Habits to Improve your Running

1) Take the Warm Up More Seriously – Most runners don't and pay for it in some capacity. Remember these 2 things: You are most vulnerable to injury when not warmed up and you will not perform as well in a race if you don't warm up aggressively enough. Repeat these 2 points until your attitude towards warming up changes!

Regular Warm up – Just as the Kenyans start out super slow for EVERY workout (4+ minutes per mile slower than their marathon pace), so should you. The proof will be in the pudding as your risk of injury will go down and you will feel better in your runs.

*Extra credit: Do a 'pre-warmup' by cross training (elliptical, stationary bike, or walk) or doing a series of exercises like squats, lunges, and dynamic stretches for 10-20 minutes.

Race Warm up – Warm up longer and more extensively like elite athletes do. For a 1 miler to half marathon, do a 20-30 minute warm up jog followed by a 3 minute tempo run (10K-half marathon race effort or more relaxed than 5K effort). Catch your breath while doing some dynamic/light stretching for a few minutes and then finish with 5-7 striders (pick it up for 15 seconds at 5K to 1 mile race effort followed by a 30-45 second recovery jog). Time your warm up so that you won't be standing at the start line for more than 5 minutes. Be sure to hydrate to replenish. For a marathon, build in your warm up into the first 2 miles or do a 10-15 minute jog with some marathon pace striders.

2) The Right Pace Matters – Most runners settle into a monopace for most or all workouts which causes them to plateau sooner – they won't perform as well in a race, their risk of injury goes up if the pace is aggressive, and they actually burn less calories as their body becomes efficient at that pace. If you embrace the purpose of each type of workout, you'll get more out of running and racing. Here are some basic types of runs and recommended paces. For accuracy, you'll need to do a 5K race or at least a 2 mile time trial on a track to truly assess your fitness.

Recovery runs – Since the objective is to clear out the 'junk' in the legs while contributing to endurance, the pace should be 3-4 minutes per mile slower than 5K pace.

Long runs – Since the objective is to maximize endurance (time spent on your feet), the pace should be around 2-2:30 per mile slower than 5K pace.

Semi Long runs – Since the objective is to improve overall endurance, but also strength, you can pick it up a little more with a pace around 1:30-2 minutes per mile slower than 5K pace.

Goal Pace runs – I'm referring to half marathon or marathon goal pace workouts in which the objective is to familiarize yourself with how this feels. Therefore the pace should be within 10 seconds of the most common pace you hope to run for your target race. It's a WASTE of time to go any faster since you'll be in no man's land - somewhere between tempo pace and the pace you should be.

Tempo runs – Since the objective is to improve stamina based speed, the pace should be 20-35 seconds per mile slower than 5K pace

Speed workouts – Since the objective is to improve aerobic speed, the pace should be 5K pace to 20 seconds per mile faster for your ¼ mile to 1 mile repeats

3) Individualize Your Training – Due to the fact that no one has your exact genetics, work/family/free time schedule, habits, running/injury background, temperament, etc, you should be careful in compromising too much of your training by running with others or following any schedule to a tee. It's only a win-win situation when it's working for you. When it's not, something needs to change.

Since it won't be others or the schedule, you have to adjust your training accordingly. I strongly encourage you to mark up any training schedule that you choose to follow and have multiple groups to train with for the various types of workouts, or train on your own. Those who adapt will reap the benefits. I or any of your training buddies are available for feedback on your suggested changes.

4) Deal with Injuries Proactively – Most runners prolong the length of injuries by not taking long enough breaks from running, not seeking professional help and not doing the recommended rehab exercises. As soon as something doesn't feel right, deal with it sooner vs. later and you'll spend less time being injured, period. I've also come to realize that coming back from an injury requires a more extensive pre-warmup to warm up that body part adequately for running. Doing so will allow you to enjoy pain free running sooner.

Meanwhile, doing any cross training activity that doesn't further aggravate the injury is a great way to minimize the loss of fitness while you heal up. The next time you're injured, remind yourself of this: When you don't run, you get better. When you run, you get worse.

5) To Do Better on Race Day, You Have to Race – Most runners are understandably nervous about signing up for a race. However, the BEST workout for your target race is a tune up race. This is the one time where you really can go all out and test your true fitness, adjusting your paces from the result (usually for the better). You'll get the best speed, strength, and stamina from a race while improving your mental toughness for the main event. You'll also gain valuable experience – what to wear, how to read your pace, replenishing, figuring out a good warm up, etc. I recommend 1-2 races per month in the final 3-4 months before your target race.

6) Value Rest and Recovery – This one is very difficult for most runners who are driven people, and it gets them into trouble. From a race that doesn't go as well as you hoped to dealing with off and on injuries to feeling tired most of the time, these can all be traced to some extent to a lack of attention paid to R&R. It's amazing to me how often the light bulb goes on for folks when I run down a list of things that might have contributed to a subpar race that most of the time, they acknowledge a lack of sleep going into the race.

It's no secret that elite runners get more sleep than the rest of us, with naps being added to 9-10 hour overnight sleep. However, it's also the little things like making sure to get a snack and liquids within 30 minutes after a run (especially a speed workout or long run), cooling down, going slower on recovery runs, eating healthy, backing off training during stressful times, etc. that will make running tougher than it needs to be.

7) Cross Train for Better Overall Fitness – Most runners run, period. But just like any other sport where you move your body the same way, over and over again, this will eventually lead to muscle imbalance and overuse injuries. Injecting a variety of cross training into your routine will guard against this with some positive outcomes: changing it up never lets your body become too complacent which means you'll burn more calories and boost your metabolism for more effective weight management.

There are no magic bullet activities to recommend other than to incorporate some form of strength/resistance training and ratcheting up the intensity – whatever you'll actually enjoy doing is the best choice. Try to do at least four 20-30 minute workouts a week when you combine your runs with cross training activities. Those looking for an extra edge can do 'two-a-days' in which you run and cross train on the same day, but only if it's practical with your life schedule.