

# The Beginner Runner

## Easing Into It

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As a healthcare practitioner, I am often asked, “why do you run when it’s so hard on your joints?” To me, the question isn’t “why” do I run, but rather “why not?” The benefits of running are many, including improved cardiovascular function, reduced risk of stroke and heart disease, improved blood pressure, improved bone density, improved immune functioning, weight management, and mental alertness, to name only a few. These benefits clearly outweigh the risks, and when following a proper training schedule, most people will find running a valuable addition to their lifestyle.

Having said that, there are a few tips that first-timers should know to help make their transition from non-runner to runner a smooth one:

1. **Doctor clearance.** As with any exercise program, it is very important to consult with a doctor before you begin to make sure that you are at a level of health to sustain increased activity.
2. **Educate yourself about the sport of running!** There are plenty of instructional and informational books on store shelves and the internet is an important resource for any runner with a computer. Specialty running stores are another great option, and their staff will be knowledgeable and willing to help answer your questions or provide advice.
3. **Now you need some proper running shoes!** While the sport of running is remarkably inexpensive, running shoes are not the place to save a few bucks. You can run without the fancy Dri-fit t-shirts and fuel belts, but you CANNOT run without a good pair of running shoes. Running places force greater than three times your body weight on the joints of your lower limb, therefore it is critical that your footwear can support these forces. Every person is unique, and a gait assessment is required to determine the proper shoe for your foot and your goals. A sports-based practitioner or specialty running store are good options for this service.

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4. **Start slowly!** You do not need to run 10km on your first run! In fact, you can begin with as little as one minute of light jogging, depending on your fitness level. For brand new runners, three repeats of one minute of jogging followed by five minutes of walking is often a good start. There is nothing wrong with walking during your runs, and it does not mean you're not a "real runner". I qualified for and competed in the Boston Marathon following a run/walk program! As you improve and your distances increases, it becomes imperative that you follow the "10% rule". This rule states that your longest run of the week should not increase by more than 10% the following week. Practically speaking, if your long run is 10km one week, your longest run the following week should not be more than 11km. This will help to decrease your risk of injuries!
5. **Listen to your body!** Do you have a nagging pain that just won't go away no matter how slow you run? Do you have a pain that is getting worse with each run you do? Or does something just not feel right? Listen! You will find that as you embrace a healthier, running lifestyle, your body awareness will improve, and you'll be conscious of signals that your body is sending. Don't ignore these! Pain is simply the end result of a problem that has been building over time- get it examined by a sports-based healthcare practitioner. Most often, an injury that is addressed early heals faster than those left to become chronic.
6. **To stretch or not to stretch?** Much research/debate has been raised in this area in the past few years. This debate is centered around static stretching, during which the athlete holds a stretch in one position over an extended period of time. What is agreed upon is that you shouldn't stretch a cold muscle and that the effect of stretching, positive or negative, on performance is likely negligible for beginner runners. So give yourself a sufficient warm-up with a fast walk or light jog and then do what feels right for you.
7. **What to eat and drink.** For beginner runners, nutrition and hydration during a run are less complicated because of the shorter distances covered. Research conducted at Texas A and M's Human Performance Lab showed that for activities lasting greater than one hour, consumption of carbohydrate and electrolyte solutions will help to maintain performance. For all runners, it is important to always remain hydrated, consuming at least eight to ten 250ml glasses of water/day. Keep a water bottle at your desk, in your purse, and in the car- if it is easily accessible, you will be more likely to meet your hydration needs. Limiting diuretics such as caffeine and alcohol, and minimizing your intake of fatty, processed foods will only help to support your newfound running lifestyle.
8. **Find a running buddy or running group!** Not only is this the safest option, but it will help you to remain motivated, enjoy your runs, and even improve your performance!

What a great way to make new friends with similar interests and values! Now you have officially become “one of those crazy runners”!

9. **Stick with it, it WILL get easier!** As your body and mind accommodate to your new activities, your runs will become less strenuous and more enjoyable. Your muscles, tendons, and joints need time to adapt to the new demands you’ve placed on them and your body will respond favorably in no time. But again, read #5, and listen to your body! Know the difference between the-muscle-is-just-tired-soreness and an injury!

10. **Have fun!** After all, isn’t that why we run?