

Preventive Steps

A few aches and pains are unavoidable on the way to the start. Here's how to keep them from sidelining your racing plans

1 FIND THE RIGHT PACE

In training, proper pacing is everything. You can use a heart-rate monitor and do most of your runs at 65 to 75 percent of your maximum heart rate. Or, even more simply, listen to your breathing. If you can comfortably hold a conversation, then your pace is just right.

2 BE CONSISTENT

This may be the most important training strategy of them all. Without consistency, it's impossible to progress, and you're at risk for injury. But consistency doesn't mean locking into a training schedule and doing exactly what it says to do no matter what. Being flexible is important, too. For example, if you're planning to train tomorrow at 7 a.m. and you wake up and it's 90 degrees, find a window of opportunity later in the day, or plan to make it up later in the week.

3 MAKE TIME TO WARM UP AND COOL DOWN

Warming up will make each run feel easier and help avoid pulled muscles. A proper warmup begins with walking or running very slowly to ease your body into a comfortable running rhythm. Consider walking briskly for five minutes (about a quarter-mile), then gradually ramp up to your running pace. When you finish your run, resist the urge to stop suddenly. Instead, walk for another five minutes to cool down so that you can bring your heart rate down more gradually.

4 DON'T HESITATE TO WALK

Walk is not a four-letter word. Pausing to walk during a run is not a form of cheating, but an effective way to manage your energy and get the run done. It breaks a big piece of work into smaller pieces, making it more doable—and at times more effective.

5 STAY SAFE ON THE ROAD

The biggest threat you'll face as a runner on the road is the car. Try to find flat traffic-free routes with wide shoulders; run on the left side of the road, facing traffic; obey traffic signs and signals.

6 TAKE IT EASY ALONG THE WAY

It's easy to overdo it on the days you feel good, or when you're running with a faster friend. But running farther or faster than you're ready for can lead to injury and burnout. Stick to the plan, and resist the urge to add on miles or intensity, even when you feel strong enough to do so.

7 LET PAIN BE YOUR GUIDE

Injuries can happen, especially during periods when you're ramping up mileage. A little muscle soreness is normal, but if you feel a sharp, sudden pain that persists or worsens while you're on the road and after you finish, or causes you to alter your gait, it's best to stop running and rest. See a sports-medicine doctor who has experience working with runners.

8 RUN RELAXED

As long as you're running comfortably and injury-free, there's no reason to worry about your form. But minor modifications can help you become more efficient. Run "tall" and upright, not with a forward lean. Look toward the horizon, not at your feet. Keep your shoulders relaxed and away from your ears, and avoid tightening the muscles in your arms. On uphill, shorten your stride, and drive with your arms.

9 RUN ON SOFT SURFACES

Varying the terrain that you run on can help minimize the risk of injury. Mix in a run on a track, trail, or a treadmill here and there, and you could avoid a setback. If you head off road, just be wary of technical trails with rocks and roots that can be tricky to navigate. The track and treadmill are predictable with no roots or curbs to trip over. Both surfaces are also more cushiony than asphalt.

10 WRITE IT DOWN

Keeping a training log can be an invaluable tool for staying injury-free. By having a record of what you've run and how you have felt before, during, and after all of your workouts, you can spot trends that lead to burnout or injury. Plus, seeing all the miles pile up can be very motivating and can help you keep sight of all that you have accomplished!