

A Quick Guide to Running Better

There are three main reasons why people pick up injuries from running. You are never going to totally remove the risk of injury, but it is well worth trying to minimise the risks. The key to getting fitter and faster is to follow a training regime which allows you to train consistently and slowly build up.

These principles are written with respect to running, but could equally apply to any energetic activity you are going to do.

So, the 3 parts to running properly and improving on just “going for a run” are

1. Warm Up and Warm Down
2. Strength and Mobility Work
3. Improving your Running Technique

1. Warm Up and Warm Down

A good warm up doesn't need to take too long – you need to raise your body temperature and then ensure that you have put your muscles through the range of motion that they will perform during the activity you are to undertake.

A run of about 4-5 minutes at about 60% effort will be sufficient to raise your temperature enough to stretch properly. Traditionally, this would be through performing a number of static stretches – this is still okay, but it is important not to hold them for more than about 10 seconds. A more modern approach is to use a series of dynamic controlled exercises to accomplish this task – these could be leg swings, arm circling, hip rotations, gentle lunges etc. Do not bounce stretches (like footballers of the 70s – this is dangerous and can easily cause injuries).

You would then do a series of drills to replicate what you will do when you run. These should be slow and controlled at first, gradually building up to moving at the speed you run at for your session / race, at which point you'll be ready.

The warm down should be used to try to stretch your muscles back to their pre-exercise state. I find the best way to do this is to do 2-3 short runs of only about 60m with a walk back between them at about three-quarters pace. Then have a good stretch (statically) of the major muscles used during your workout, this time holding the stretches for about 30 seconds. Finally finish with a slow jog of the same sort of duration as the warm-up.

2. Strength and Mobility Work

Most runners are mobile enough for running, stretching before and after sessions is usually enough to maintain this. If you have been inactive for a long time and then start running, this may not be the case, in which case a stretching regime could be incorporated. If you have a specific problem

then further stretching between sessions can help alleviate it – a common example is a sore Achilles tendon, which can be helped by stretching your calf muscles more often.

Many injuries and poor performance are caused by weaknesses in specific muscles. Many runners have poor core stability – so work on stomach and back muscles can make a big difference. If you are not strong here, you will have difficulty holding a good posture when running. Commonly, this can lead to your hips sagging and you slow dramatically, due to losing knee lift and then put extra stress on your hamstrings if you try to accelerate.

The other muscles that are commonly weak in runners, particularly those who have had a break from exercise for a significant period of time are calves. These can get very tight when used more than they are used to, which can lead to the achilles problems mentioned before (normally tendonitis).

It is worth stretching your calves well and performing some strengthening exercises (both with straight leg and bent) to ensure they will cope with the rigours of running.

3. Improving your Running Technique

To understand how to improve your running, you need to understand what is needed for a decent running action.

There are five basic parts to this action, which need to be considered. Some coaches may simplify this or break it down further, but here we'll consider the actions listed.

- Toe Up (Dorsi Flex)
- Heel Up
- Knee Up
- Reach Out
- Claw Back

Here is my able assistant Tom – running with decent technique.

This article is a bit too short to explain them fully – for a full description see www.momentumsports.co.uk/TrRunTech1.asp

It is extremely difficult to try to work on each of these at once in the full running action and is one of the reasons why Running Drills are important. We can perform drills to isolate parts of the running action and improve it before putting it all back together as a complete action.

These drills include step-over drills, single leg isolations, heel flick / high knees and a whole range of others – again see the Momentum Sports website for more details.

With respect to running at different speeds to the above it is relatively simple - if you wish to run faster (i.e. sprint) you should have more knee lift, more extension, more claw back and more drive with your arms. Equally, for longer distances (slower running) do less of each of these.

Whilst your legs are clearly of primary importance, your body position and the use of your arms contribute significantly to the overall technique. You should run with your whole body leaning slightly forwards (not bending at the waist), with your neck and shoulders relaxed. It is important that your foot strike is behind your centre of gravity (hence the leaning forwards), as this will avoid a braking action on your stride, which causes you to slow and increase the pressure on your joints and muscles.

Concentration on running tall is often useful, as this stops your stride being too short and the temptation to lift your knees unnaturally high.

Your arms should swing through in the direction you are travelling, not across your body. The height at the front and back of the arm swing will depend on your speed.

For sprinting, you should bring your arms up to about chin height at the front and so your upper arm is almost parallel with the ground at the back. The angle of your lower to upper arm should be around 90 degrees (just less at the front and just more at the back). For longer distances the range of movement is simply, again decreased, with the emphasis being on relaxation and balance, as opposed to drive.

I hope that this gives a quick guide to running well, to increase your speed and reduce your injury risk.

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www.momentumsports.co.uk