

Some advice before you start....

Training for your marathon or half marathon will be challenging, but should also be fun and enjoyable. Finishing a marathon is an accomplishment that less than 1% of people in the world can say they have achieved. You are about to be one of them!

Are you a beginning runner? Already a runner? Haven't run in a long time? Either way, you can finish a marathon. Reading through some of the pointers below will help you along the way.

Motivation: Whether you are training for a marathon or half marathon, it takes a lot more than good old determination and willpower to get you through training and the big day. Let your mind lead the way, not your body. Try to determine the big picture of why you want to do this. By the way, why do you want to do this? Don't let yourself off by stopping at your first answer! Dig deep! Why do you want to run a marathon or half marathon? When you go beyond that first answer, you will begin to realize what is really driving you. When you learn what is really driving you, then you can use that to push yourself through willpower and determination. You will build the foundation that will get your subconscious mind working for you, not against you. In short, you are in for an incredible experience.

Wear the right gear: Treat your feet to a good pair of running shoes as these will be your most important piece of gear. Shoes are designed to fit feet with different arches, pronation, width etc. Visit a local specialty running store to find the best shoes for your feet. A comfortable, well-fitted pair of runners will add to your enjoyment and may also prevent painful and costly injuries.

Pre-Training: Before you begin your training, you should be able to run for at least 30 minutes without stopping. Distance is not important, you just need to get your body used to running. Combinations of run/walks are great to use during pre-training because they ease your body into the exercise and minimises the chance of experiencing a running injury. See the 8 week 'Get Started' programme below for ideas.

Avoiding Injury: Use your non-running days to rest and recover. If you feel a niggle, back off the training for a day or two. Better to miss two days than two weeks! Ice down any soreness a few times per day for 15-20 minutes.

Training: Your mileage should gradually increase each week before tapering off in the final weeks leading up to the marathon / half marathon to allow your body to recover from training and so you will be strong on the big day. Having the long runs under your belt will give you a major psychological advantage on the day.

Stretching: Stretching regularly should be part of your running routine. Stretching offers many benefits including helping to prevent muscular aches, pains, cramping and injury. It will also reduce the possibility of muscular fatigue and increasing the muscles efficiency/ effectiveness of movement. Although it is generally considered more important to stretch after a run than before, if you feel that you need to stretch before your run you should ideally jog or walk for 5 or 10 minutes before stretching to warm the muscles up and to get blood flowing.

Some stretch basics:

- Stretch the muscle to the point of its greatest range of motion, but do not overextend. You should feel very minimal tightness/discomfort (but not pain).
- Hold and control the stretch for at least 30 seconds (and maximum 60 seconds).
- Stretch all the major leg muscle groups (e.g., calves, hamstrings, quadriceps, groin, hip flexors).
- Stretch uniformly (after stretching one leg, stretch the other).
- Don't overstretch an injured area as this may cause additional damage

Long Runs: The key to these programs is the long run on weekends. Consistency is most important. You can skip an occasional workout, or juggle the schedule depending on other commitments, but try not to cheat on the long runs. Notice that although the weekly long runs get progressively longer, every few weeks there is a "recovery" week, where mileage is reduced to allow you to gather strength for the next phase.

Run Slow: Do your long runs at a comfortable pace, one that allows you to converse with your training partners, at least during the beginning of the run. Toward the end, you may need to abandon conversation and concentrate on the act of putting one foot in front of the other to finish. However, if you find yourself finishing at a pace significantly slower than your pace in the first few miles, you probably need to start much slower, or include regular walking breaks. It's better to run too slow during these long runs, than too fast. The important point is that you cover the prescribed distance; how fast you cover it doesn't matter.

Walking Breaks: Walking is a perfectly acceptable strategy in trying to finish a marathon / half marathon. It works during training runs too. You could walk 1 minute out of every 10, or 1 minute every mile. Walking gives your body a chance to rest, and you'll be able to continue running more comfortably.

Cross-Training: Cross-training is any other form of aerobic exercise that allows you to use slightly different muscles while resting (usually) after your long run. The best cross-training exercises are swimming, cycling or even walking. Cross-training for an hour the day after your long runs will help you recover.

Rest: Rest is an important component of any training program as it is during the rest period (the 24 to 72 hours between hard bouts of exercise) that the muscles actually regenerate and get stronger. Hard running (such as the long runs) allows you to improve, however, you'll find that you can't run hard unless you are well rested. If you're constantly fatigued you will fail to reach your potential. This is why rest days are vital. If you need to take more rest days - because of a cold or a late night at the office or a sick child - do so. The secret to success in any training program is consistency, so as long as you are consistent with your training during the full program, you can afford, and may benefit from, extra rest.

Keep track: It is advisable that you keep track of your training efforts and results during race preparation. This will allow you to analyse your improvement. Looking at your "diary" can also help with motivation.

Taper This is a golden rule of marathon / half marathon training, which forms one of the main cornerstones of all the schedules. If you don't taper (ease off) sufficiently for

the race, you may find that you've wasted all those hard sessions. You will find that these schedules reduce your weekly and long run mileage during the final weeks to ensure that you will be fully recovered from previous workouts while at the same time be completely rested for the big event.

Hitting the wall: You've heard the phrase, you may have even experienced those energy-sapping effects 18 miles or so in, affectionately known as "hitting the wall". The weak legs, light-headedness and strong urge to stop are caused by a depletion of glycogen (carbohydrate stores) and an almost complete reliance on fat for fuel. While fat can power a runner for days in theory, it can't maintain the same speed and intensity as carbohydrate. Couple that with dehydration and it can bring you to a sudden and grinding halt. Fortunately, there is an effective weapon against the wall...

Nutrition: Understanding how nutritional status affects the body during exercise is very important. And it's not just about race day. Eating the right foods at the right time, before during and after long training sessions will compound to make your overall training program that much more effective. Be sure to get the nutrition you need (carb's, proteins, unsaturated fats) to keep you strong and allow for adequate recovery. Cut down on junk food such as biscuits, sweets, soft drinks and the like. You're going to be asking a lot of your body over the coming weeks and months so you want to make sure to fuel it properly.

Hydration: On runs of an hour or more, carry fluids with you and consume 6-8 oz. every 20 minutes. During training it can be advisable to weigh yourself before and after each run and get your body weight back to the weight it was before the run by drinking water or sports drink within the first hours after the run. Always hydrate well - you will lose a lot of water through sweating (even if it's cold outside).