

10 Tips for Injury-Free Running

By Thad McLaurin • For Active.com

1. Track your shoes' mileage. Worn out shoes can often contribute to and/or exacerbate pain in the ankles, knees, and hips. Like the shelf-life of the loaf bread in your pantry, your shoes have a "road-life." Instead of time, shoes are best checked for "freshness" by the miles put on them. A good rule of thumb is to buy new shoes every 300 to 500 miles. This will vary from person to person. A small person with a neutral gait may get closer to the 500 miles while a heavier/taller runner may breakdown his/her shoes more quickly and only get 300 miles.

2. Have more than one pair of running shoes. To extend the life of your shoes, having two pair is a great idea. Alternate your runs between the two pairs. Or, you could also have one pair suitable for longer runs and a lightweight pair for your faster speed workouts. Having two pairs is also helpful when you've had a rainy or muddy run. While one pair is drying, you can run in the alternate pair.

3. Only run in your running shoes. Wearing your running shoes to work or for your daily routine, can quickly break them down. After my running shoes are past their running prime, they become my knock-about-shoes. Then when they're too worn out for that, they become my yard work shoes.

4. Have a gait analysis done. Make sure you're wearing the right pair of shoes for your foot strike. Many running shoe stores and running coaches offer running gait analysis as a service. They'll have you run on a treadmill and/or outside and analyze how your foot lands when you run. Whether you roll inward, outward, or have very little or no roll will help them determine if you need a neutral, stability, or motion control shoe.

5. Stretch, Stretch, Stretch! Pre- and post-run stretching is very important in helping prevent injury. Dynamic stretching such as walking, an easy jog, butt kicks, side shuffles, walking lunges, and high knee are all examples of dynamic stretching. If you still feel tight after the dynamic stretches, then you can do some of the more traditional static (stretch-n-hold) stretches. After your run, static stretches for the quads, glutes, calves, hamstrings, and hip flexors are appropriate. If you've been sitting at a desk all day or driving hours in the car, you can become very tight. It's important to loosen up those muscles before taking them for a run.

6. Drink up! Proper hydration is vital in helping to prevent muscle cramps. If you're dehydrated before you begin your run or if you become dehydrated during your run, you increase the risk of depleted electrolytes. Potassium (an

electrolyte) is needed in order for your muscles to relax after they've contracted. If you begin your run with depleted potassium levels or you deplete them while sweating on the run and don't rehydrate while running, you increase your chances for cramping of the calves, quads and/or hamstrings.

7. Rein it in! Avoid overstriding. Work on a foot landing that's more underneath your torso. This allows your body (ankles, knees, and hips) to work more like a shock absorber. This also allows more of a mid-foot (flat-foot) or forefoot landing which allows you to work with the pavement not against it. Having more of a mid-foot or forefoot landing allows you to push off the ground instead of pulling-then-pushing which happens when you strike the ground with your heel out in front of the body. This heel-striking causes a breaking effect instead of allowing your body to work like a shock absorber. This breaking effect can jar the knees and hips.

8. Lean baby, lean! Increase your pace by leaning forward from the ankle (not the hips). The subtle forward lean will increase your pace without widening your stride. Don't believe me? Try it. You'll be amazed. Adding the lean not only will help increase your pace, but it will do it with less muscle activation, which means less energy used, which means fatigue takes longer to set in.

9. Do more than run. Adding full-body (lower-body, core, and upper-body) muscular endurance circuit training will help you build muscles that will endure and support you on your runs, particularly your long runs. Running really is about 50 percent lower-body and 50 percent upper body. The stronger (muscular endurance-wise) your core and upper-body are the longer you'll offset fatigue. Think lighter weights, more reps (12 to 15) and less rest between sets. Remember you're shooting for the Ryan Hall and Josh Cox look, not Arnold Schwarzenegger.

10. Sort it! Plagued by nagging aches and pains but can't seem to pin point the cause? Then track your runs on a spreadsheet. Create columns for each type of run you do (trail, road), weather conditions, your various shoes, time of day (morning, midday, afternoon). Next, add columns for other factors such as if you fueled pre- and post-run, stretched pre- and post-run. Then add columns for aches and pains (sore knees, sore ankles, sore hips, etc.) Finally add columns that rate the run (Great, Mediocre, Horrible, etc.). For each run, put a check mark in each column that applies to that run. Do this for about four weeks. Then sort the data by the aches-n-pains columns. For example, do a sort by "Sore Knees" Then look at all the runs that caused your knees to be sore. What other common factors pop up? Did you wear an old pair of running shoes for each run? Was each run on a route with a lot of concrete? Did you forget to stretch before each of the "sore knee" runs? This will quickly help you see patterns in your running that you can avoid or try to repeat.