

7 Secrets to Prevent Running Injuries

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At least half of all runners deal with at least one injury per year, and 25 percent of runners are injured at any given time.

There's really no good reason why so many runners should get injured. And yet it happens all the time, mostly because runners don't train intelligently or they follow programs that are faulty in design.

Injuries happen because the physical stress from running is too much for your body to handle at that time. The human body is great at adapting to stress, but only when you apply that stress in small doses. When you apply the stress too quickly for your body to adapt, something breaks down.

Every time your foot lands on the ground, your leg absorbs two to three times your body weight. Multiply that by the number of steps you take to run five miles, and multiply that by how many times you run each week, and you can see how much stress your legs have to deal with to be a runner.

The main predictors of running injuries are:

- 1) Mileage: How many miles you run per week is the greatest predictor of injury risk. It's hard to say exactly how many miles per week increases the risk of injury because that's an individual matter. You may be able to handle 50 miles per week and your running partner may get injured with 30. Some runners (called Olympians) can run more than 100 miles per week and not get injured. On average, the risk of getting injured is two to three times greater when running at least 40 miles per week.
- 2) Previous injury: If you've had an injury in the past, you're at an increased risk for another one. A previous injury makes that body part more vulnerable.
- 3) Lack of running experience: If you're a new runner, you have a greater risk for injuries because you're not yet used to the stress of running.

So, do you want to stop getting injured? Follow these seven training secrets:

Secret #1: Train smart.

To train smart, train at more effective levels of effort to get the best results. The goal of training is to obtain the greatest benefit while incurring the least amount of stress. That means you want to run as slow as you can while still meeting the purpose of the workout and obtaining the desired result. Follow a systematic and progressive training plan, with each cycle of training building on what came before to create a seamless and safe program.

Secret #2: Increase your weekly running mileage very slowly and spread it out over the whole week.

How quickly you increase your weekly mileage probably has the greatest impact on whether you get injured. The slower you increase your weekly mileage, the less chance you'll get injured.

When you increase your mileage, add only about a mile per day of running so that you spread the stress around. For example, if you run 20 miles over four days in a week, run no more than 24 miles next week

by adding one mile to each of the four days. Don't run 24 miles next week by adding all four miles to only one day of running.

Many books and articles quote the 10 percent rule of increasing mileage, but there's nothing special about 10 percent, and you can often increase by more than that if you're smart about how you do it.

If you're a highly trained runner, you may be able to get away with adding more miles more quickly, especially if you have experience running longer distances. For example, if you've run 60 miles per week in the recent past and now you're training for your fifth marathon and building your mileage, you don't necessarily have to go from 40 to 45 to 50 to 55 to 60 miles per week over a couple of months. You may be able to make bigger jumps in mileage because your legs already have experience running 60 miles per week. However, if 60 miles per week is brand new territory for you, then you need to increase your mileage in smaller increments. If you're a new runner, an older runner or are prone to injury, run the same mileage for three to four weeks before increasing it.

Secret #3: Don't increase your running mileage every week.

Run the same mileage for two to four weeks before increasing it. Give your legs a chance to fully absorb and adapt to the workload. You want 30 miles per week to be a normal experience for your body before increasing to 35 miles per week. And that takes time.

Secret #4: Don't increase the distance of your long run every week.

This is especially important if you're entering uncharted territory with your long runs (i.e., you've never run that distance before). Repeat the same long run for a few weeks before running longer. You want a 9-mile run to become normal before you try to run 10 miles. Most marathon and half-marathon training groups make the costly mistake of ramping up the long run too quickly because their training programs are only five to six months long, so they increase the distance of the long run every week throughout their programs until it's time to taper two to three weeks before the race. That's a good way for new or recreational runners to get injured because the stress increases week after week without a break. If you're running your first marathon or half-marathon and you're starting from a short(ish) long run, you need to give yourself much longer than five or six months to prepare without risk of injury.

Secret #5: Don't make the long run so long.

To avoid injury, don't make your long run such a large percentage of your weekly running. Ideally, your long run shouldn't be more than about a third of your weekly mileage. So, if your long run is 10 miles, you should run at least 30 miles per week. If your long run is 20 miles, you should run at least 60 miles per week. The majority of runners don't run that much, so you need to be creative when training so that you don't accumulate so much stress in one run.

Don't misunderstand—the long run should be stressful. After all, you're running for a long time and trying to make yourself exhausted so your body adapts. However, you don't want the long run to be so much more stressful than any other run during the week. It's always better to spread the stress around. Complete a medium-long run mid-week that's about 65 to 75 percent of the length or duration of your long run. This strategy helps to ameliorate the potential damage of your long run being more than a third of your weekly mileage.

Secret #6: Run EASY on your easy days.

The biggest mistake runners make is running too fast on easy days. This adds unnecessary stress to your legs without any extra benefit and will make it more difficult to complete a quality run on your harder days. Easy runs should feel gentle and allow you to hold a conversation (about 70-75% max heart rate).

Secret #7: Never increase your weekly mileage and the intensity of your workouts at the same time.

When you begin to include interval training and speed work into your program, either reduce the overall mileage for the week or maintain your mileage from where it was before you added the extra intensity. Your legs can handle only so much stress at once. Trying to increase your running volume while also increasing the intensity of your workouts is too much for most runners to handle.

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