

7 Training Tips for Your First Half Marathon

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So, you've run a 5K, maybe even a 10K, and now you're ready for something more challenging like a half marathon. Good for you! The half marathon is a great distance. It's long enough to feel challenged, but not so long that training for it completely consumes your life.

Below are a few good training tips for your first [half marathon](#).

1. Build a base. One mistake new runners often make when paring for a half-marathon is thinking that the 12- or 14-week plan takes you from the couch to the finish line. All half-marathon training plans that range in length from 10, 14 or 16 weeks assume that you've already built a weekly mileage base of at least 15-20 miles. Your longest run should also be at least 5 miles. Anything less than this weekly mileage or longest run mileage will overwhelm your body's ability to acclimate. If you have a solid base under your feet, then when you start your training, you'll only be acclimating to the demands of the training workouts. If you have a weak base coming into the training, then you'll actually be asking your body to build that base while at the same time as acclimating to the new training demands. That's overtraining or an injury just waiting to happen.

2. Pick a plan. Twelve weeks is a common length of many half-marathon training plans, however do a Google search and you'll find plans that range from 10 to 16 weeks. I prefer to use a longer plan (14 weeks) with my runners. The extra weeks allow for a little wiggle room if a runner gets sick or has slight set back or injury. If this is your first half-marathon, I strongly recommend a plan longer than 10 weeks. This will give you more time to acclimate to the training demands.

Not only do the plans vary in length, they also vary in content (the types of workouts, weekly mileage, and the number of times you run each week). Study the various plans carefully before picking one. First, find one that meshes well with your work and family schedule. If the plan has you running every day and you know that's not going to happen, then that plan is not for you. Second, find a plan that matches your running fitness level. If the first long run in the plan is 8 miles and your current longest run is 4, select a different plan. Often plans are labeled for Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced or Experienced, but even then, read through the plan carefully and make sure it fits your current running fitness level.

3. Think quality over quantity. Running lots of miles each week is one way to prepare for a half-marathon, but lots of miles can increase our chance of injury. I have my new half-marathon runners run four times a week. Two of these runs are what I call **quality runs** and two are **base maintenance runs**. The quality runs consist of a mid-week **tempo run** and a weekend **long run**.

The types of tempo runs vary, but basically they begin and end with a 1-mile warm-up /cool-down and the in between miles are run at a pace about 30 seconds slower than 5K pace. The Tempo portion is an uncomfortable pace. This helps your body increase VO2Max (your body's ability to take in and utilize oxygen at the muscle layer to make energy) as well as push out your lactate threshold (that point at which you feel that burning sensation in your legs). Increasing VO2Max and pushing out your lactate threshold helps make you a more efficient runner as well as help fight off fatigue longer. A tempo run can range from 4 to 8 miles, and the types of tempos can vary.

Three good tempo workouts include: the **traditional tempo** (described earlier), **race-pace tempo** and **tempo intervals**. Race pace tempos are very similar to the traditional tempo, but instead of

running 30 seconds slower than your 5K pace, you pull it down a notch to your half-marathon race pace. This is a great workout for giving your body a chance to experience what it feels like to run at race pace. Saving your race-pace tempos for the longer 6, 7, or 8-mile tempo runs works well. Tempo intervals begin and end with the 1-mile warm-up/cool-down, but the in between miles are broken into 5-minute fast/5-minute slow intervals. The fast interval (fartlek) is run about 20 seconds slower than 5K race pace and the slow interval is run at your slow easy long-run pace. This teaches your body to learn how to speed up and/or slow down when needed during the race. Here are more specifics on these [tempo workouts](#).

The long run is just that...long. This run should be run at a pace that's about 1-minute slower than race pace. That's hard to do sometimes, but by pulling back, you help your body build endurance without wearing it down. To help curb the urge to run faster as well as teach your body that you can pull out some speed at the end of the race, I have my runners up the last 1 to 2 miles of the long run to race pace or slightly faster. Most half-marathon training plans will take the runner up to 12 or 13 miles. There's no need to do a run longer than 13 for a half.

The two weekly base maintenance runs are short runs (4 to 5 miles). These are designed to keep the weekly base miles going and to help keep the runner limber between the quality workouts. These runs are also run at a slower pace (45 seconds to 1-minute slower than race pace).

4. Cross-train. Doing non-running but aerobic cross-training as well as light resistance training on your off running days is a great way to optimize your running fitness. Cycling, swimming, using the elliptical machine or row machine are all great forms of cross-training. Light resistance training particularly targeting the [core](#) and [upper body](#) will greatly help you maintain good running form longer during your runs, helping to fight off fatigue.

5. Find a training group. Whether you're paying for a coach who is leading a group training program or you just round up your running buddies, training in a group can make all the difference in the world in how successful you are with your training. When you know you'll be missed, you tend to be more accountable for your workouts. On those early morning long runs, you're much more likely to roll out of bed when you know the gang is waiting for you. Also, having a buddy's encouraging word or just a pat on the shoulder during a tough run, can really make a difference in pulling through and fighting off fatigue.

6. Investigate the race. Find out what sports drink will be provided at the race. If possible train using the same sports drink, or plan ahead how you'll use your own (wear a hydration belt, have friends or family members staked out along the route to hand you your sports drink of choice). Never use a sports drink or gel during a race, that you've never tried/tested during training.

Scope out at which mile markers water and/or aid stations will be provided. Also find out if and where port-a-johns will be placed along the route. Knowing where these are located can be very important if you begin to experience stomach distress along the run.

Check out the elevation map (usually provided on the race website). Pin point where the hills (if any) are located. Just because a race is in a flat area of the country doesn't mean it will have a flat course. Many races will incorporate the rolling hills of local parks and/or cross over high-rise bridges or ramps to and from overpasses or underpasses.

7. Rest. Rest is just as important as a run workout. Your body needs time to rebuild and repair. Skipping rest days will tax your body's ability to recover and make you more prone to injury. Be sure to take your scheduled rest days, but also listen to your body. If you're feeling worn down, have no energy, feel sore, tired, lethargic and or unmotivated, check your resting

heart rate before getting out of bed. If it's just a few beats higher than normal (and you don't have a cold or some other type of infection) you more than likely are overtraining and need a rest day.

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