Break Your Bad Running Habits
By Kara Mayer Robinson
Runner's World

In 2001, Melisa Christian was a 3:30 marathoner plagued by stomach cramps and frequent porta-potty stops. But she never sought a doctor's help. "I thought it was either a normal part of training or race-day anxiety," says the 31-year-old Dallas dentist. Three years later, Christian was diagnosed with food intolerances. After she eliminated wheat and dairy from her diet, her symptoms vanished. In November, she ran a 2:41:57 personal best in New York City. "I no longer have the mindset that because I'm a runner I can't benefit from a checkup," she says.

Running makes us fit, not invincible. When we neglect our bodies' basic needs, we can't go as far or, as Christian discovered, as fast. Breaking your bad habits with these easy fixes will make you a better runner, not to mention a happier, healthier person.

BAD HABIT:
You Are Your Own Medic
We runners are often hyperaware of our bodies, and when something's "off," we're quick to self-diagnose and treat. We'll ice a tight hamstring, pop ibuprofen, and hobble through lingering pain. Big mistake, says Lewis G. Maharam, M.D., medical director of the New York Road Runners and Team in Training. "Minor injuries could turn into serious issues like muscle tears or stress fractures."

BREAK IT :
When you have a nagging ache or pain, the sooner you see a doctor—preferably a sports-medicine specialist—the faster you'll be back on track. An expert who recognizes that you're an overpronator, for example, could offer better insights on treating your iliotibial band syndrome. If you've been sluggish on runs, schedule a checkup. Asthma, a heart murmur, high blood pressure, or anemia can sap energy levels. Ask your doc to test your blood's iron stores. "Serum ferritin, a protein responsible for iron storage, can become depleted, which is associated with slower recovery and declining performances," says Dr. Maharam.

BAD HABIT:
You Never Stretch
It's hard to squeeze in runs some days, never mind stretching. But tight muscles can contribute to shinsplints, plantar fasciitis, and muscle pulls, which could sideline you for weeks. Improved flexibility also shortens recovery time; looser muscles are more receptive to glycogen replacement, which accelerates healing, says Skip Stolley, director of VS Athletics Track Club in Santa Monica, California.

BREAK IT:
Your muscles get the most benefit from stretching postrun. Ideally, you'd tack on a 15-minute flexibility routine to your workout. No time? Drop a six-miler to a five-

miler and use those leftover minutes to hit your calves, quads, hamstrings, and glutes. "You're not hurting your workout—you're enhancing it," says Stolley. "The benefits of stretching will do your body more good than could be done by running that mile."

BAD HABIT:
You're a Night Owl
Runners who shortchange sleep compromise recovery, immunity, and mental sharpness, which can turn an easy workout into a grueling one. "Sleep enhances the restoration of cells that are damaged from running," says Ralph Downey, Ph.D., chief of sleep medicine at California's Loma Linda University Medical Center. Getting enough shut-eye can also ward off "effort headaches." A 1999 study found that distance runners experienced twice the number of headaches as nonrunners. Downey says this is most likely due to the dilation of blood vessels and sinuses that occurs during exercise. The good news: The headaches occurred less often when the runners got more sleep.

BREAK IT:
Some people are fine with five hours, others require 10. Runners who put greater demands on their bodies tend to benefit from the higher end of that range, says Downey. Note how many hours you get each night in your training log. Review it and look for patterns. Once you figure out your target number, try to hit it each night, particularly during the week leading up to a race.

BAD HABIT:
You Forgo Sunscreen
In 2007, the Archives of Dermatology reported that runners are at a higher risk of developing skin cancer than nonrunners. Researchers found that the occurrence of skin abnormalities increased with mileage, not only because of increased sun exposure, but perhaps because training can suppress immune function, making the body more susceptible to the sun's ill effects. Another study named sweat as a contributor to UV-related skin damage; perspiration increases the photosensitivity of skin, which makes it more prone to burning. "The sun is definitely a job hazard for distance runners," says Deena Kastor, 2004 Olympic Marathon medalist, who was diagnosed with squamous-cell carcinoma and melanoma in 2001.

BREAK IT:
Before every run, put on a water- or sweat-proof SPF 15 lotion that shields against UVA and UVB rays, says Rodney Basler, M.D., past chairman of the American Academy of Dermatology's Task Force on Sports Medicine. If you have fair skin or a family history of melanoma, follow Kastor's example: She slathers on sunscreen, wears sun-protective clothing, and avoids midday runs.

BAD HABIT:

You Never Rest

Overtraining can cause persistent soreness, suppressed immunity, injuries, moodiness, and loss of motivation. "Rest isn't the absence of training, it's an important component of it," Stolley says. "During recovery periods, your cardiovascular and muscular systems are restored and rebuilt to a higher level—that's where all performance gains are made."

BREAK IT:

Every training program should have a rest day in addition to two or three easy days (shorter, less-intense runs following harder efforts) each week. If you didn't have a strenuous week, it's okay to cross-train—go for a hike or swim, take a yoga class, or treat your dog to a long walk. But if you're coming off a high-mileage week, reward yourself with a day of total rest. Schedule a massage or breakfast with a friend so you'll feel like the time off was well spent.