

The Art of Recovery During Marathon Training

- By Mackenzie Lobby | For Active.com

One of the biggest misconceptions runners have when signing up for their first marathon is that the training is all about running. The mileage and workouts are what will prepare your body to perform over 26.2 miles, but without rest and recovery, all that training can't happen in the first place. While you can often get away with subpar recovery tactics in preparation for a 5K, 10K or even a half marathon, it becomes vital when logging lots of miles for marathon preparation.

Adequate recovery allows you to log key workouts day after day. Without a regimented recovery routine, you're less likely to bounce back after a hard run and be able to put in the prescribed mileage the following day. In fact, it is during the recovery phase that the physiological adaptations are made to make you a better runner. If you continue to stress your body without stopping to heal and adapt, your training will be for naught.

Aside from good old-fashioned rest days, there are other things you can do to feel fresh even the day after a long run. "Recovery comes down to a few things: the nutritional aspect, the physical aspect and the mental aspect," says [Gary Berard](#), a marathon coach based in New York City.

Rest days allow you to focus on other priorities in your life so you can maintain both balance and sanity. The nutritional and physical aspects, however, require you to be more proactive. In particular, fueling and hydrating properly, icing after key efforts, and subscribing to various therapies, like massage and Active Release Technique, can help speed your recovery from one day to the next.

How to Refuel

Nutrition is often the forgotten piece of the puzzle when it comes to proper recovery. As many runners will attest, you usually don't feel like sitting down to a big meal as soon as you walk in the door from a long run, but it turns out, it's one of the best things you can do. "The nutrition side of training and recovery is so overlooked by athletes," says Steven Devor, a Ph.D. in exercise physiology and professor at The Ohio State University. "What you put in your machine makes a huge difference."

A strategic plan to rehydrate and refuel after a workout can mean the difference between a good run and a bad run the next day. Hopefully you're already taking in fluids during longer runs, but it's also important to continue to drink water and sports drinks all day long. In fact, a [study](#) presented at this summer's American College of Sports Medicine annual meeting showed that even being slightly dehydrated can affect performance. Their research demonstrated that when runners replaced only 75 percent of their sweat lost during exercise, they were 3 percent slower than when they rehydrated over 100 percent. That can mean minutes in a marathon!

Taking in carbohydrates and protein after long runs and hard workouts is also imperative. Ideally, you should ingest a 4:1 ratio of carbs to protein almost immediately after you finish running. "Recovery is all about getting protein and carbohydrates in so your muscles can start to repair themselves," explains Devor. "If you don't get that within the first 30 minutes, you're compromising recovery."

Eating or drinking a recovery shake or chocolate milk is important during that window of time because that's when your body is most receptive to glycogen replenishment and muscle repair. "Every runner is different, so it's important to find out what your stomach can handle and what works best for you," adds Berard.

Ice to Speed Recovery

Icing is a time-tested method of recovery long used by athletes in just about every sport. "I can't think of many other things that are more important for recovery than icing or using an ice bath," says Devor. Even if you don't have any nagging aches or pains, hopping into an ice bath for a few minutes can help you avoid potential injuries. "Running can cause a lot of inflammation in the connective tissues in your knees, feet, ankles and hips, which are where overuse injuries often happen," he continues. By reducing the blood flow through icing or an ice bath, that inflammation is reduced.

Berard says he usually does ice baths after long or intense workouts. "During high-mileage weeks I feel less damaged the next day," he says. "That exposure to cold helps combat the trauma of running." While both icing and ice baths are effective, an ice bath allows for full immersion, which is advantageous. If you're in a hurry, consider taking ice packs or an ice cup with you on the go. Either way, you'll garner the anti-inflammatory benefits.

Why Massage Is an Effective Recovery Tool

Massage, Active Release Technique, and Graston are other popular recovery tools utilized by runners. The effectiveness of massage has long been touted by pros and newbies alike. The easiest approach is through the use of at-home tools, like a massage stick, foam roller or tennis ball. Although you might not be a massage expert, there are plenty of tutorials online that show you how to use these properly. "At-home massage is very effective, just be careful not to over-massage a spot that is already inflamed," says Berard.

If you have the means and access, going to a professional sports massage therapist is worth every penny. They will be able to work out the tension deep in your muscles that develops over many miles of training. "The advantage of having someone else do the massage is that they can get to areas that you can't get to on your own," adds Devor. "It also tends to be a little more aggressive than you'd get with something like the foam roller, but it's the exact same principle."

Active Release Technique and Graston are two newer therapies that many runners have begun to rely on for recovery and maintenance. Active Release is a manual technique that involves the practitioner applying pressure to certain areas while the patient goes through various ranges of motion. The idea is to improve movement patterns by working out adhesions in the soft tissues. Graston is a related technique, wherein stainless steel tools are used to work out scar tissue and increase range of motion to restore proper movement patterns.

Whether you choose to utilize all or just a couple of these recovery methods, you are likely to notice improvements almost immediately. Keep in mind that whether you down a recovery shake, hop in an ice bath, or commit to a foam-rolling regimen, small changes in your approach to recovery can equal big improvements in performance.

About the Author

Mackenzie Lobby is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer and photographer with a Master's in Kinesiology from the University of Minnesota. She has run 10 marathons and is a USATF certified coach. When she's not writing, she's out swimming, biking, and running the Minneapolis Chain of Lakes. Check out her website at mackenzielobby.com.