Tread Rightly: Avoid Treadmill Mistakes

Holding onto the handrails is the most common treadmill error. If you can't do it without holding on, then take the level down a notch

Amy Bertrand, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The treadmill offers a great workout for a great many people, but too many people are doing it all wrong, say experts in the field.
You may be making several mistakes on the treadmill that you aren't even aware of.

"Everyone makes mistakes," says Rick Morris, professional running coach and author of Treadmill Training for Runners (Shamrock Cove, 301 pages, $15.95). "I train other runners, and even I make mistakes on the treadmill."

The most important thing to keep in mind is to walk or run on the treadmill the exact same way you would without the treadmill. "You want to mimic what you would do when you're outside," says Morris.

With that, here are the top five mistakes people make on the treadmill. If you're making these, you may not be getting the most out of your workout, and worse, you may be hurting your body.

1. Hanging On
"That's the biggest one I see," says Jennifer Poulsen, fitness manager of 24 Hour Fitness in Arnold, Mo. When you hold onto the rails, you're holding your weight up, and not using your legs to hold your weight up. "In that case you aren't getting your heart rate up, and you're not burning enough calories."

If the workout is so tough you can't do it without holding on, take it down a notch and work at your level.

However, "I've never seen anyone who doesn't hang on," says Morris, who trains runners in Colorado. "It's so tempting. Even I have trouble not grabbing on when I get tired."

2. Not Working Hard Enough
Just getting on the treadmill isn't enough, says Poulsen. "You have to push yourself to get your heart rate up."

Jennifer Bradley, a trainer who teaches a treadmill class at the Workout Co. in St. Louis County, Mo., agrees.

"The No. 1 thing I see is people not working at a good intensity. They're just casually walking, and it's like, if you're going to do it, get something out of it. You need to go at a faster speed or a higher incline. I say if you can read on the treadmill, you can pick up the intensity."

Bradley says 90 percent of treadmill users at her gym don't use the incline. "You don't have to do much -- just a little makes a huge difference in intensity."

3. Stepping Off the Treadmill
Another common mistake is jumping off the treadmill belt and onto the sides to rest, towel off or get a drink of water. "It would be better to just decrease the speed," says Morris. Stepping off can be bad for the joints and disrupts the natural flow of your workout. Plus, it's often just an excuse to take a break; don't get in that habit.

4. Not Knowing Your Pace
Don't be fooled into thinking that the eight-minute mile you're doing on the treadmill is the same as an eight-minute mile outside. In his book, Morris talks about the treadmill-equivalent pace.

"More than likely you're not going the speed it says you're going," he says. "Because the belt is moving, that's doing part of the work for you; in addition, there's no wind resistance." Because of that, Morris recommends adding a one- or two-percent incline to your run to get a pace more like an outdoors pace.

For instance, a 10-minute mile on a treadmill is equivalent to a 10:43 mile of "free-range" or outdoor running. A 10-minute mile on the treadmill with a one-percent incline translates to a 10:13 free-range mile, and a 10-minute mile with a two-percent incline is a 9:46 mile.

5. Changing Your Stride
That moving belt can play tricks on your stride. Some people are afraid of falling off of the belt; they make up for it by running too close to the front of the treadmill, causing them to shorten their stride. "You don't want those short, choppy steps," says Morris.

On the flip side are runners who "subconsciously think they have to reach and keep up with the belt, so you overstride," says Morris. You don't want that, either. Strive for a relaxed, normal stride, whether you're running or walking.