

Getting Back Into Running Is Easier Than You Think

Whether you're lacing up your running shoes after a few months or a few years, follow these tips to avoid injury and frustration.



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Dusting off your running shoes after a break can be intimidating. If an injury, pregnancy or busy work schedule got in the way of your passion for running, you may wonder if you're now too out of shape. Will your body even remember how to run a certain pace? Or will your legs feel weak and wobbly? And how many times do you have to pound pavement or hop on a treadmill before it feels fun again?

The good news is that your muscles retain a memory of their former strength, which can make it easier to bounce back than if you were starting from scratch. If you were sidelined for only two or three weeks, you may not even notice a significant change in your running performance, especially if you remained physically active during your time off.

If it has been longer, you may not want to rush back to several-mile runs. Mix running with walking, take time building up strength in unused muscles, and use a few tricks to motivate and reward yourself.

It can take about two months for a new behavior to become automatic. Once it does, it also becomes less taxing. But until then, you want to minimize the potential for injury and frustration. Use these expert-backed tips to get past the annoying retraining period so you can hit the open road with passion.

Ease into a routine.

You are more likely to stick with a running habit if you start with small goals. That may mean holding yourself back a bit, both in terms of pace and distance. "Slow and steady wins the race," said Karena Wu, a physical therapist and owner of ActiveCare Physical Therapy in New York City. Slow down until you can pass the talk test, which means carrying on a conversation while running.

Try to do two to three short, easy runs per week. You could also follow a couch to 5K training plan designed for beginner runners and those who are returning after a long break. Alternatively, you may use a strategy that incorporates walking breaks into your runs.

Whichever plan you pick, be sure it has elements of strength training, stretching and resting. The point is to stay consistent and remember that you are using this time to recondition the muscles, tendons, ligaments and connective tissues in your legs, Dr. Wu said.



Getting back into running can be painful at first. Find small rituals or rewards that keep you going back, and don't be afraid to incorporate a run/walk strategy. Landon Speers for The New York Times

Build in immediate rewards.

You may think you can muscle through the first few weeks or months of running, but research suggests that motivation alone is not always enough. Pairing small, immediate rewards to a task — like watching Netflix while on the treadmill or treating yourself to an Epsom salt bath after a long trail run — can make it easier and more enjoyable to continue doing these activities.

“People repeat behaviors that they enjoy,” said Wendy Wood, a research psychologist at the University of Southern California and the author of “Good Habits, Bad Habits.” “If you hate running to begin with, there’s probably not much you can do to motivate yourself to repeat it.”

Short-term rewards can carry you through the days when your motivation is lagging. And they may even accelerate the formation of your new running habit.

Research shows that you can also get psychological rewards from running with a group of friends, affirmations from a coach or listening to your favorite music. Some studies have shown that people who listen to music are able to run faster, perform better and feel less exhausted.

Start strength training.

Strength training helps prepare your body for running again and can keep you injury free for the long haul. Many physical therapists and running experts even recommend strength training a few weeks before returning to running to build up muscle strength, increase flexibility and improve overall biomechanics.

“I think a lot of people use running to get in shape, but I would really recommend getting in shape to get back to running,” said Irene Davis, an expert on the biomechanics of running at the University of South Florida.

Runners tend to be weak in their feet and ankles, as well as their hips and glutes, Dr. Davis said. To strengthen these areas, try weight lifting, yoga, calisthenics or plyometrics at least two days per week.

Dr. Davis and Dr. Wu recommended exercises that train multiple muscles at the same time, like single and double leg calf raises, lateral band walks (or monster walks), planks, lunges, squats and step-ups.

Stretch.

A well-designed warm-up can also get your blood flowing and prepare your muscles for running. Dr. Wu and Dr. Davis recommended dynamic stretches, in which you move your joints and muscles through full ranges of motion, mimicking the movement you're about to perform without holding them in place. For runners, they are often the same exercises used in strength training, like lunges and squats, as well as butt kicks and high knees.

Research has offered mixed and often contradicting results regarding the benefits of cooling down after a workout. But many athletes and physical therapists, including Dr. Wu, recommend static stretches, in which you hold a position for a period of time, after a run. She also recommended bringing your knee to your chest, pulling your ankle toward your glutes, leaning against a wall to stretch your calves or going into a deep lunge and moving your hips in a circle. Experiment with stretching and see if it makes you feel more flexible or helps you regain energy for the next run.

Get enough rest.

Just because your body remembers how to do a five-minute mile doesn't mean your muscles and joints are ready for the toll running can take. While you are rebuilding stamina and strength during runs, you're also breaking your body down in many ways, like opening microscopic tears in your muscles. Taking at least one day off a week will help avoid injury and let you come back stronger, allowing your body time to recover.

During each run, your body also depletes its stores of glycogen, a type of carbohydrate saved in the muscles and liver. Resting and refueling helps replenish these reserves so that you can use them as energy when you run again.

Remind yourself that you are making progress throughout the whole process. Running is an invigorating way to exercise with the breeze in your hair and the ground at your feet. So dust off those shoes and head out the door.