



# Why Every Runner Needs Fartlek Training

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For runners who are just starting out, the concept of speed work can be intimidating. You might envision runners grinding out endless painful intervals on the [track](#).

But don't worry — that's not the only option. Even though faster workouts can be challenging, they can still be fun. Fartleks are the perfect combination of playful and faster running, and they're an ideal way to introduce speed work to your training.

## WHAT ARE FARTLEKS?

Fartlek is a goofy sounding word that makes most of us giggle. Fortunately the word has nothing to do with farts. It's Swedish, and when translated it actually means "speed play."

*Fartleks are simply periods of faster running interspersed with easier paced running.*

When applied to your training, fartleks are simply periods of faster running interspersed with easier paced running. They can vary by time, pace and effort or even heart rate. Fartleks can be structured or unstructured, depending on your goals and where they fall into your training schedule.

The beauty of fartlek training lies in its versatility. Fartleks can be an introduction to faster running for a beginner or someone returning from injury — or they can be a challenging workout in an experienced runner's training cycle. They are often run by effort level (such as a "hard" effort with an "easy" recovery), but can also be set up with paces to make them race specific.

## WHY RUN FARTLEKS?

Once you have established a regular running habit, it's time to introduce some variation in your running paces. When you run at the same pace every day, your body adapts to that effort and your improvement levels off. If you want to get faster, you have to gently push yourself out of your comfort zone.

Adding some faster running to your training challenges you mentally and physically. But remember more is not always better. It's important to start slowly and build gradually. This is why fartleks are especially useful — they can be introduced progressively and adjusted as you continue to improve.

Fartleks are fun and endlessly versatile. They are easy to fit into your training and teach you how to get a feel for a variety of paces. Fartleks can also be tailored to meet any goal, whether you're just starting to run faster or training for your 20th marathon. Some options include the following:



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- Use fartlek training in place of more formal track workouts.
  - Alternate the structure of fartleks to develop higher levels of mental fitness.
  - Use fartleks as a “bridge” between easy running and more challenging workouts.

Remember to have fun. Since fartleks are so unstructured, there’s no pressure.

## CREATING A FARTLEK WORKOUT

Now that you better understand the concept of fartleks, it’s time to create a fartlek workout. As with any faster running, fartleks should always follow at least 1–2 warmup miles to allow your body to loosen up before running at a harder effort. Allow another mile or 2 to cool down afterward as well.

Fartleks offer you the opportunity to structure your workouts in a variety of ways:

- Run a fixed distance for the repetition.
- Complete a specific time for the repetition.
- Vary the distance/time for the reps and recoveries (such as a ladder-type workout)
- Run the intervals based on pace or effort level.

Fartleks can be both structured and unstructured. An unstructured (or random) fartlek is when you don’t use any set time or distance. You may run fast between two houses, up or down a hill, or even for the length a song you’re listening to. Random fartleks are most appropriate early in your training cycle or if you just want to get used to faster running in a fun, low-key way.

Time-based fartleks are probably the most common. Rather than running a set distance, you run a certain pace or effort level for a specific period of time. Most commonly fartleks are anywhere from 30 seconds to 5 minutes in length, but they can be longer depending on the goal of the workout.

Here are some examples of structured, time-based fartleks:

- 10 reps of 1 minute hard and 1 minute easy
- 8 reps of 90 seconds at 5K pace and 2 minutes easy
- 6 reps of 5 minutes at tempo effort and 1 minute easy
- 2 miles of 2 minutes hard and 1 minute easy.
- Ladder intervals: hard effort for 1, 2, 4, 6, 4, 2, 1 minutes with equal length recoveries.

A coach or a quality training plan can help you determine how best to fit fartlek training into your weekly schedule, depending on your current fitness and goals. The longer the interval and the shorter the rest, the harder the workout becomes. You can also run these on rolling or hilly terrain for an added challenge.

Fartleks are an ideal workout for almost all runners because of the variety of mental and physical benefits they offer. They’ll make you stronger, faster, more efficient and mentally tough.