# Running Basics: Distance

by Julia Malacoff
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Once you've got running form and terrain down, you've got to consider how far to run. Any experienced runner can tell you that how you run 1 mile versus 10 versus 20 varies. The truth is, how far you're running (or want to run) has a major impact on your effort level, speed and training strategy. While there's definitely a time and place for fun runs without a specific structure in mind, if you have a distance goal, there are some key points you need to know. Ahead, experts share their insights on distance.

It might be tempting to stick to the same running route all the time, but mixing up your run distances is an awesome way to add variety to your training and improve your running while you're at it, explains Thomas Watson, a UESCA-certified running coach and founder of The Marathon Handbook.

"If you're sticking to short- to medium-length runs, there's nothing inherently wrong with running the same distance every time, but your performance will likely begin to plateau," Watson says. Adding shorter and longer runs improves your running game long-term.

"Shorter, faster runs — such as interval training and repeats — are more intense, but improve your running economy, your base speed and can make you a more powerful runner," Watson notes. They also add variety, which can make your running routine feel more fun.

"Longer, slower runs are great for increasing your running endurance," Watson says. "Add in one long run per week, gradually making them longer and longer to work on your stamina." More importantly, these runs should be slower than usual. "You want to make sure you're running a sustainable, conversational pace. Long runs are a staple of training plans everywhere, especially when preparing for a 10K, half-marathon or full-marathon."

Most runners end up increasing their mileage at some point, whether they're training for a specific distance or simply want to boost their endurance.

The biggest point here is that mileage increases should be done in a strategic way, experts say. Coaches often rely on the "10% rule," which states that runners shouldn't increase their total mileage by more than 10% per week.

A training plan may also help, Watson says. "The most important thing is to be structured to avoid big gaps or leaps in mileage. A good training plan will structure your runs so that your mileage increases are incremental. It will also allow days for recovery and step-back weeks where your mileage doesn't increase. These help reinforce the gains you've already made in training."

Lastly, it's crucial for newer runners to pay close attention to any aches and pains that crop up as mileage is increased. "It's important to address these through foam rolling, rest and seeking advice when needed to avoid a more significant injury," Watson notes.

The 5K distance, which is 3.1 miles, is the most approachable race distance. But even though it's short, it attracts novice and experienced runners alike. Here's how experts recommend training for a 5K.

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## DON'T GET DISCOURAGED

"Most beginner 5K runners struggle with getting past the hardships of the first couple of weeks of running consistently," says Molly Armesto, a running coach and founder of All About Marathon Training. "This is a powerful time when your body is making adaptations. It's changing and evolving so that eventually running will feel like second nature to you instead of awkward and exhausting."

Her takeaway? "Don't stop here. Anything that is worth doing will take a certain degree of effort."

2

## INCORPORATE THE RUN/WALK TECHNIQUE

For newer runners trying to build up to running without stopping, alternating between running and walking can be helpful. "Choose the variation that works best for you: 1 minute of running with 1 minute of walking or perhaps 5 minutes of running with 1 minute of walking," Armesto says. "As you progress, slowly begin to cut down on your walking intervals a little at a time and ultimately increase the time you spend running."

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## NEVER RUN IN PAIN

"If you ever experience pain during a run, stop, walk and wait to resume running until you no longer feel pain," Armesto says. "This can be hard to do, especially if you want to complete your training run. But running through pain is the best way to wind up with a full-blown running injury."

4

## IF YOU'RE MORE ADVANCED, ADD SPEED WORK

Experienced runners will likely be going all-out on a 5K, which means running above the anaerobic threshold. "In other words, your body is producing more lactate than it can flush out," Watson explains. "When you're in this state, you fatigue quickly and can potentially burn out completely." This phenomenon is also known as "bonking."

"Speed work like intervals, repeats or HIIT workouts helps to train your body in this anaerobic state and move the needle on that threshold — meaning you can go fast for longer without bonking," Watson adds.

Next up: the 10K or 6.2 miles. "The 10K is usually the distance that will determine if you have had enough of distance running or if you crave more of a challenge," Armesto says. "It's a great distance for those who have already been running for awhile or perhaps are physically active and want to start racing."

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## ESTABLISH A RUNNING BASE

"Before beginning a 10K training program, you should be comfortable running about 3 miles without stopping," Armesto says. "If you can't quite make it 3 miles yet, continue to take the time and develop a solid base before beginning to train for a 10K."

2

## MIX UP YOUR TRAINING

By the time you make it to a 10K, you should regularly be running different distances and speeds. "You should do regular long runs to gradually increase your maximum distance, speed work to improve your anaerobic threshold and running economy and regular runs to help get those miles in," Watson says. "And remember to gradually increase your total weekly mileage by no more than 10% per week to avoid overtraining."

3

## SET UP RUNNING SYSTEMS

"You want to increase your chances of success, and one way to do this is to minimize the time it takes to get you out the door and running," Armesto notes. "Turn your running into a routine. Create habits such as laying out your clothes, filling your water bottle the night before and keeping all of your running related-items in one spot."

At 13.1 miles, the half-marathon is one of the [most popular distances](#). "It's a great distance that is not too long while still being long enough to provide a challenge and sense of accomplishment," Armesto explains. "There is definitely an appeal to the half-marathon over the full-marathon, as it typically means less recovery time, less training time and less race time with the same adrenaline-rushing excitement."

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## DON'T MAKE IT YOUR FIRST ATTEMPT

"For half- and full-marathons, I recommend that runners have been running at least a year and have run some shorter distance races like a 10K," says Steve Carmichael, founder of [RunBuzz](#) and a USATF- and RRCA-certified running coach. "This ensures that your bones, muscles and joints have had time to adapt to the impact of running, thus reducing your likelihood of getting injured."

2

## CONSIDER YOUR LIFESTYLE

As you approach longer distances, how you spend your time outside of training starts to matter more. "When running half- and full-marathons, nutrition, fueling, hydration, mindset, strength training, sleep, balance of workouts-to-recovery and time management all become important factors to consider," Carmichael says. Set yourself up for success by establishing habits that will *help* your running efforts, not hurt them.

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## GIVE YOURSELF A CHANCE TO WARM UP

"Keep in mind that the first mile of any run is usually the hardest," Armesto says. "Get past that, and you will feel better! Make a pact with yourself that you will never quit a run before you've run 1 mile. If it's really not your day to run, you can decide to stop after you pass that 1-mile mark."

Running a marathon has everything to do with building your endurance level, Armesto says. Here's what you need to know about training for the full 26.2.

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## INCREASE YOUR BASE

"To stay injury-free and have the ability to complete long training runs week after week, you need to have a solid running base," Armesto says. "A good weekly mileage before beginning to train for a marathon would be about 15–20 miles. "

2

## LONG RUNS ARE ESSENTIAL

"No matter what your running ability or marathon goals are, the long run is key to a successful marathon," Watson says. "Do long, slow training runs once per week — most people do them on the weekend — and focus on miles, not speed." Gradually build up the mileage, peaking at 20–22 miles, then tapering for 2–4 weeks before the race.

"Your long runs should double as 'dress rehearsals' for your actual event, Watson adds. "They're your opportunity to try out all your gear, your race nutrition and hydration strategies, and get to know how it feels to be running for hours on end."

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## RUN SLOW

"Beginner marathon runners should do their long training runs at a slower pace than normal," Armesto advises. And not just a little bit slower, but between 1–3 minutes slower. "This not only dramatically reduces your risk of injury, but also helps you make aerobic adaptations that will build your endurance," she explains.

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## WORK ON MENTAL TOUGHNESS

"Running any distance requires a certain amount of mental strength, but it's absolutely imperative in order to run a marathon," Armesto says. For this reason, she recommends including mental training in your plan. "Practice techniques such as visualization and self-talk that you will be able to utilize on race day."