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Fitness on the Run

Spring marks the rebirth of many runners. Swept up by the first warm breezes of the season, individuals who've sequestered themselves indoors all winter suddenly lace up their running shoes hit the road.

Running remains one of the most accessible, effective and popular cardiovascular workouts. Just consider the burgeoning number of people running marathons. Races that drew a few hundred participants 20 to 30 years ago now draw entrants by the thousands.

Whether you're a veteran runner or a beginner, you can use the following tips to maximize your enjoyment of the sport and minimize your risk of injury:

Get the right equipment. Invest in a pair of running shoes and some appropriate apparel. Sales personnel at stores that specialize in running can analyze your gait and recommend the proper shoe. For example, they can tell you if you:

- overpronate (your feet roll inward excessively) and need a stability or motion-control shoe;
- underpronate and need a highly cushioned shoe; or
- pronate normally and need a certain combination of the above features. Also, be sure to replace your shoes every 300 to 500 miles. Finally, dress in moisture wicking fabrics that you can layer depending on the temperature.

Set a goal. Whether you want to complete your first 5K road race or improve your time for 26.2 miles, having a specific goal can keep you focused and give your workouts purpose.

Don't increase your mileage by more than 10 percent/week. As your endurance and confidence increases, it's easy to bump up the mileage too fast. Even veteran runners are tempted to log extra miles in the early stages of training. Don't. You're only inviting injury, which could knock you out of the race completely.

Mix it up. In addition to long easy runs, add some hill workouts and tempo runs to your weekly schedule. Not only will it keep your workouts from feeling monotonous, you'll become a stronger runner.

Keep a running log. By tracking your mileage and workouts, you can determine what works and what doesn't. Also, make note of when you begin running in new shoes so that you'll know when it's time for a new pair!

Lift weights. You can enhance your running performance by adding two strength-training workouts to your weekly program. Focus on your leg and core muscles, which will protect your joints and help you to maintain good posture as you run.

Join a running club. From organized group runs to training tips, running clubs are a great way to connect with other runners in your community. Visit Road Runners Club of America at www.rrca.org to find a club near you.

Stretch, stretch, stretch! To keep your stride smooth and efficient and reduce your risk of injury, you must maintain a certain level of flexibility. After each run, when your muscles are warm and most pliable, do a variety of stretches for your hamstring, quadriceps, gluteal, calf, and hip flexor muscles.