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That Very First Time - Hal Higdon, Senior Writer, Runner's World

Regardless of whether you are a beginning runner or walker, here are the key items to consider when approaching your first running race, whether a 5-K or marathon.

Friendliness: Fellow competitors will respect and admire you. They remember their "first races" and how nervous they were. Expect a welcome reception from all others in your first race from elite athletes to newcomers like you.

What to wear: Dress for comfort. A visit to your local specialty running store will provide you with everything you need for race day from comfortable shoes to your race uniform. Although a favorite pair of shorts and the race T-shirt will do the trick, some of the wicking fabrics work better on hot days.

Extra gear: Water bottles are great for rehydration while training, but there should be more enough fluids on the course. Also, leave your radio at home so as not to miss the sights and sounds of a great race. Wear shades, not because it's cool, but to protect your eyes from the sun. A billed cap also is advised.

Course check: Examine the course map to determine where mile markers are along with aid stations, portable toilets and medical support. You may not need the latter, but it's good information to know. Don't worry about the weather; it's something you can't control.

Drink up: Taking fluids at regular intervals during the event is important, particularly if it is a hot day or a long race. You can skip an occasional aid station if it is crowded, but don't miss too many. Walk when you drink, so you don't spill the water or gulp it down. Sports drinks will help restore energy.

Eat cautiously: Unless you feel really hungry, eating food probably isn't necessary in most races. A meal high in carbohydrates (such as pasta) the night before should get you through. Practice good nutrition while training. Forget those fad diets. A proper mix of 55 percent carbohydrates, 30 percent fat and 15 percent protein is best for fitness and for good health.

Stretching: To loosen up, do some easy stretches before the race, but stretching is best practiced during training after you run (after your muscles have warmed up). While entire books have been written about the art of stretching, you can learn to stretch simply by using common sense and observing what other runners do.

Training: Walkers and runners train in a similar fashion: mixing "hard" days with "easy" days with rest. Pick a good training program that allows you to gradually increase the number of miles you walk or run--then stick with it! Consistency is very important if you want to meet your goals.

Rest: Rest is essential, because only when you rest do your tired muscles recuperate and actually build strength. If you overtrain by doing too much, you not only risk injury, but you also will be unable to train successfully because of accumulated fatigue.

Injury prevention: If you train intelligently (see above), you should be able to avoid getting injured. Wearing proper shoes also helps. Most running injuries are not life threatening and can be cured rapidly with an extra day or two of rest. If your injury fails to respond to rest, seek the advice of a sports medicine professional, such as an orthopedist or a podiatrist.

Treatment: Most running injuries respond to RICE: Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation. Icing the injury along with anti-inflammatory medicine such as Ibuprofen can help reduce swelling. A good massage therapist (or physical therapist) may be able to assist you with your treatment.

Pacing: Even pace usually works best, but it's better to start slow and finish fast. If you are a walker or don't know how fast you might run, line up in back at the start. If you start with faster runners, they may pull you out faster than you want to go. Better to pass people at the end than have them pass you.

Cross-Training: Running day after day can be difficult. Most runners employ some form of cross-training (participation in other sports) not only for variety, but to build fitness. Other aerobic sports such as biking and swimming work best. Beware of sports such as basketball or volleyball, which feature sudden changes of direction.

Strength training: Lifting weights and other muscle-building exercises are good for overall fitness and long-range good health. If you haven't strength trained before, however, you don't want to start now. Experienced lifters also may want to cut back on their routines as the miles build near the race.

Training log: Keeping a diary of your workouts can be an important motivational tool. It proves that you have followed your training program and can help you build confidence. There are some sophisticated training programs online, but for simplicity record the number of miles you do each day on a wall calendar.

Heart rate: Purchasing a heart rate monitor that records your pulse rate while running can also keep you in the training zone and motivate you as well. Most successful training is done between 65 and 75 percent of maximum heart rate, although determining that "max" can be tricky. Follow the instructions that come with the device.

Mind games: Completing a long distance race requires mental as well as physical strength. Setting specific goals (interim as well as final) will help you with your training and in the race.

Running & walking: If you are a fitness walker, you may be able to finish faster if you include some jogging. Runners also can benefit from occasional walking breaks, particularly while passing through aid stations. But plan well in advance how much walking you plan to combine with your running, and vice versa.

Overtraining: This happens when you train too hard or too often in a mistaken belief that "more is better." Often, it is not. Signs of overtraining include chronically sore muscles, general fatigue, inability to sleep or eat properly and an elevated resting pulse. Program regular rest days to avoid overtraining.

Warming up: Many elite athletes warm up for 60-90 minutes before they race to make sure they are ready to run fast right from the start. For most recreational athletes, some easy jogging, walking and stretching is probably enough. Determine a warm-up that works for you during your training. The same with cooling down after workouts and the race.

Supplements: Magic doesn't come in a bottle. Most vitamins, minerals and other nutrients promoted to improve your performance will help little and cost much. Eating intelligently is the best plan. Consider seeking the advice of a Registered Dietitian to find out how to do just that.

Sleep: Proper sleep is necessary for success, but don't be surprised if nervousness causes you to stay awake the night before the Big Event. Get plenty of sleep the night before the night before to combat that problem. Adequate rest all during your training program is even more important.

Do it right: Preparing for your first race by following all of the advice offered above will guarantee your success. There is no substitute for intelligent training and arriving at the starting line with the attitude that this is going to be fun, and I'm going to give it my best shot. Success will then be guaranteed.
