Endurance training basics

Last reviewed: November 4, 2026



Most endurance training should feel easy, with a small share of hard work.

Why it matters: Whether you're aiming for a first 5K or a marathon, the most common mistakes are running too hard too often and adding distance too fast. Both raise the risk of injury and burnout without making you faster.

The big picture: Build distance gradually, and avoid any single run that's much longer than anything you've done recently. Consistency over months matters more than any one workout.

What to do with this

- **Keep most runs easy:** a pace where you can talk in full sentences. See "The cardio dose."
- **Add one or two harder sessions a week** once you've run regularly for a couple of months.
- **Grow slowly.** Keep each run no more than about 10% longer than your longest run in the past month [1].
- **Make the long run your key session** for half marathons and longer, building it gradually.
- **Plan for months, not weeks.** Steady training over a season beats a few heroic weeks.

Go deeper

The terms:

- **Endurance (aerobic) training:** sustained exercise, such as running, cycling or swimming, that relies mainly on the oxygen-based energy system. See "How your muscles make energy."
- **Aerobic base:** the foundation of fitness built by weeks of steady, easy training.
- **Easy, moderate and hard:** rough intensity zones. Easy means you can talk comfortably; hard means only a few words at a time.
- **Volume:** how much you train, usually counted as miles or hours a week.
- **Long run:** the week's longest session, usually done at an easy pace.

What people believe: To get faster, every run should be hard. Or that a marathon plan is mostly about covering big miles fast. Successful athletes do the opposite.

Mostly easy, some hard:

- Competitive endurance athletes training 10 to 13 times a week do about 80% of their sessions at low intensity and most of the rest as hard intervals [2].
- In elite athletes already training hard, adding more high-intensity work hasn't shown convincing long-term gains [2].
- In a 10-week trial, 30 recreational runners trained either mostly easy with some hard work, or with more time at moderate "comfortably hard" effort. Both groups improved their 10K times, by about 5% and 3.6%; the difference between groups wasn't statistically significant [3].
- A 2024 meta-analysis of 17 studies and 437 athletes compared polarized training (mostly easy sessions, a few very hard ones) with other mixes. Race times and other performance tests came out the same. Polarized training gave a small edge in maximal oxygen uptake (VO2max), the most oxygen your body can use, seen only in programs shorter than 12 weeks and in highly trained athletes [7].
- See "Training intensity distribution" for how to set up the mix.

Building distance:

- Running injuries are common. In one study of 629 novice and recreational runners training 8 weeks for a 4-mile race, about 26% reported an injury [4]. A review found novice runners were injured more often per hour of running than experienced recreational runners [5].
- In 5,205 adult runners followed for 18 months, a single run more than 10% longer than the longest run in the previous 30 days raised the injury rate. A run 10 to 30% longer raised it by 64%, and a run more than twice as long raised it by 128% [1].
- In that study, how much weekly mileage changed from one week to the next wasn't linked to injury [1]. An earlier study of 874 novice runners found that increasing weekly distance by more than 30% was linked to more of certain injuries, such as runner's knee and shin splints, though the result fell just short of statistical significance [6].

Between the lines: The old "10% rule" for weekly mileage was never well tested. The newer data show the bigger risk is a single run that jumps well past what you've done recently.

Reality check: The intensity research comes mostly from elite athletes and a few small trials of recreational runners, so "mostly easy" is a well-tested starting point, not a strict rule. The injury research is observational. Most studies are in runners, so cyclists and swimmers should apply them loosely.

How sure are we: Moderate that mostly easy training with some hard work suits endurance athletes. Moderate that sudden jumps in run length raise injury risk. Early on the best mix for recreational athletes.

Build your base

1. **Start where you are.** Run, or run-walk, three to four days a week at an easy pace.
2. **Track your longest run** in the past 30 days, and keep each new run within about 10% of it [1]. The cardio log in Plan my workouts shows your longest run each week.
3. **After 6 to 8 weeks of steady running,** add one harder session a week, such as short intervals or a steady faster run.
4. **Take an easier week** every few weeks if you feel worn down. See "When progress stalls."
5. **Add strength training twice a week,** and stick with it. See "Running injuries" for what it does and doesn't do for runners.

Sources

1. Frandsen JSB, Hulme A, Parner ET, et al. How much running is too much? Identifying high-risk running sessions in a 5200-person cohort study. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. 2025;59(17):1203–1210. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2024-109380

2. Seiler S. What is best practice for training intensity and duration distribution in endurance athletes? *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance*. 2010;5(3):276–291. doi:10.1123/ijspp.5.3.276

3. Muñoz I, Seiler S, Bautista J, España J, Larumbe E, Esteve-Lanao J. Does polarized training improve performance in recreational runners? *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance*. 2014;9(2):265–272. doi:10.1123/ijspp.2012-0350

4. Buist I, Bredeweg SW, Bessem B, van Mechelen W, Lemmink KAPM, Diercks RL. Incidence and risk factors of running-related injuries during preparation for a 4-mile recreational running event. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. 2010;44(8):598–604. doi:10.1136/bjsm.2007.044677

5. Videbæk S, Bueno AM, Nielsen RO, Rasmussen S. Incidence of running-related injuries per 1000 h of running in different types of runners: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Sports Medicine*. 2015;45(7):1017–1026. doi:10.1007/s40279-015-0333-8

6. Nielsen RO, Parner ET, Nohr EA, Sørensen H, Lind M, Rasmussen S. Excessive progression in weekly running distance and risk of running-related injuries: an association which varies according to type of injury. *Journal of Orthopaedic and Sports Physical Therapy*. 2014;44(10):739–747. doi:10.2519/jospt.2014.5164

7. Oliveira PS, Boppre G, Fonseca H. Comparison of polarized versus other types of endurance training intensity distribution on athletes' endurance performance: a systematic review with meta-analysis. *Sports Medicine*. 2024;54(8):2071–2095. doi:10.1007/s40279-024-02034-z