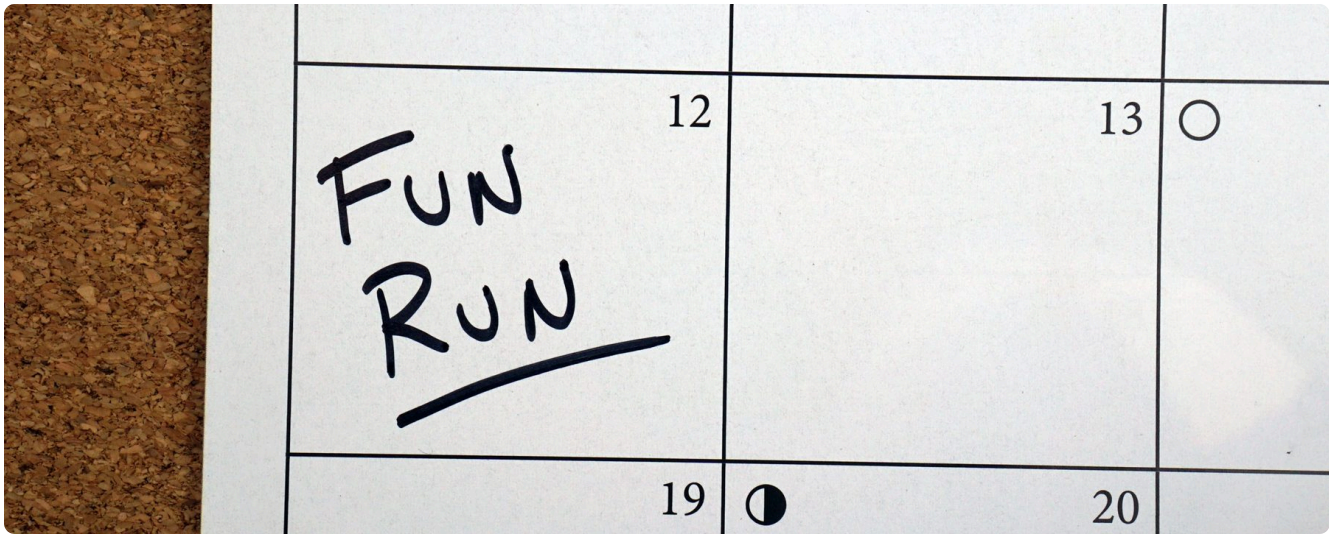
Tapering before a race

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Cut training volume by about 40% to 60% over the last two to three weeks before a big race, but keep some faster running.

Why it matters: Many runners either keep training hard until race week or stop almost completely. Both can cost you on race day.

The big picture: Keep training on most of your usual days. A well-planned taper lets you arrive rested without losing fitness.

What to do with this

- **Start your taper two to three weeks out** for a half marathon or marathon. For shorter races the research is thinner; about a week is common practice.
- **Cut volume step by step,** not all at once. Each week shorter than the last.
- **Keep some intensity:** short bouts at race pace or a little faster.
- **Keep your usual training days** but make each session shorter.
- **Don't try to make up missed training** during the taper. The fitness is already built.

Go deeper

The terms:

- **Taper:** a planned reduction in training before a competition.
- **Volume:** how much you train, in miles or hours.
- **Intensity:** how hard you train.
- **Frequency:** how many sessions you do each week.

What people believe: Resting completely before a race is best, or that cutting back will make you lose fitness. Neither is true for a short, planned taper.

The meta-analysis:

- A 2007 analysis pooled 27 studies of competitive athletes, measuring performance in real competitions or field tests [1].
- The best results came from a taper of about two weeks that cut training volume by 41 to 60%, reduced gradually [1].
- Keeping intensity and the number of sessions the same also helped [1].
- A 2023 meta-analysis of 14 studies in endurance athletes agreed: tapers of up to three weeks improved time-trial performance, with the best results from cutting volume by 41 to 60% gradually while keeping intensity and frequency [3].

In recreational marathoners:

- A 2021 study analyzed the training records of more than 158,000 recreational marathoners [2].
- Longer tapers, up to three weeks, went with faster finishes than shorter ones. A strict three-week taper saved a median of about 5½ minutes (2.6%) compared with barely tapering. Four-week tapers were no better than two- or three-week ones [2].
- Runners who cut back steadily and stuck to the taper did best. Most runners (64%) tapered less strictly [2].

Between the lines: Fitness built over months doesn't vanish in two or three weeks of lighter training. Fatigue does, and that's what makes you faster on race day.

Reality check: The meta-analyses included mostly trained, competitive athletes. The marathon data are observational, so runners who taper well may differ in other ways, such as experience.

How sure are we: Moderate that a two- to three-week taper with a 40 to 60% volume cut improves performance. Early on the best taper for shorter races and for beginners.

Plan your taper

Weeks to race	Weekly volume (share of your peak)	Notes
3 (half or full marathon)	About 75 to 80%	Last long run, shortened
2	About 60%	A few short race-pace bouts
1 (race week)	About 40 to 50%, not counting the race	Short, easy runs with a few brief pickups

These numbers are a practical way to apply the research's 41 to 60% total cut [1, 3]; adjust to how you feel.

1. **Mark your race date** and count back three weeks.

2. **Plan each week** using the table.
3. **Sleep well and eat normally.** See "Fueling for endurance events."

Sources

1. Bosquet L, Montpetit J, Arvisais D, Mujika I. Effects of tapering on performance: a meta-analysis. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*. 2007;39(8):1358–1365. doi:10.1249/mss.0b013e31806010e0
2. Smyth B, Lawlor A. Longer disciplined tapers improve marathon performance for recreational runners. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*. 2021;3:735220. doi:10.3389/fspor.2021.735220
3. Wang Z, Wang YT, Gao W, Zhong Y. Effects of tapering on performance in endurance athletes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*. 2023;18(5):e0282838. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0282838