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5 Ways to Ease Into Faster Running

Easy-paced, unstructured running can be a great way to build or maintain fitness, reduce stress and provide an excuse to get outside. But eventually, many of us get the itch to run faster.

And why not? It's fun! If you're looking ahead to a race or just hoping to build a little speed, there's no better way to do it than by adding some faster running to your training schedule.

Too much speed too soon can be a recipe for disaster, and it can leave you injured before your racing season ever gets underway. It's essential to ease into it gradually.

Introductory speed workouts are a great way to switch up your routine and train your body to run at a faster pace. They can be as structured or unstructured as you want them to be. These runs will help prepare you physically and mentally for more advanced, race-specific workouts.

Five options for easing into faster running are strides, hill sprints, fartleks, fast-finish runs and progression runs. Let's look at the specifics of each and how you can use them to benefit your running.

Strides: Fundamental for Every Runner

Strides are one of the simplest, most effective ways to introduce your body to faster running. Strides are simply short accelerations, usually about 100 meters in length, where you slowly build to about 95% of your maximum speed and then gradually slow back down to a stop. Each stride typically takes about 20–30 seconds.

Done properly, they can help you loosen up after an easy run, reinforce proper running form and prepare you for harder workouts. They can even be done barefoot to increase foot and leg strength.

Strides can be done on any surface at the end of an easy run 2–4 times per week, and they're also excellent preparation for a more formal speed workout. If you are new to strides, start with four repetitions, and give yourself 45–90 seconds of recovery time between each repeat. After 3–4 weeks, you can increase to six strides.

Hill Sprints: Speed and Injury Prevention

The thought of sprinting up a steep hill can seem pretty daunting. But like strides, this workout is short, fast and less intimidating than it sounds. Hills have often been called "speed work in disguise," and they're a great way to build strength and speed while also helping to make your body more injury-proof for a season of hard training.

Hill sprints teach you to push yourself at maximum effort, and running uphill naturally stimulates improved form, as it's harder to run uphill with poor form.

It's important to distinguish between hill sprints and hill repeats, which are two entirely different workouts. While hill repeats may include longer repetitions at a less intense speed, hill sprints are meant to be run all-out. Each sprint lasts only 8–10 seconds, while repeats may last several minutes.

To incorporate hill sprints into your routine, find a hill with approximately a 6–8% gradient. Warm up with at least 15–20 minutes of easy running and then run the first repeat at about 95% of max intensity. (Always run the first rep just under maximum speed to help yourself warm up.) Then, the rest of the repetitions are at 100% intensity. Walk back down the hill, and make sure you take at least a minute — but preferably two — for a full recovery.

If you have never attempted this type of workout, start with two 8-second sprints. While it may seem like a waste of time to do that little, remember that your body needs to adjust to running all-out! This session can be performed once or twice a week, and you can increase the repetitions by 1–2 per week until you get to a max of 10 reps.

Hill sprints force your legs to recruit as many muscle fibers as possible while sprinting uphill. This not only helps you develop enhanced running efficiency and strength, but it also improves the neuromuscular communication between your brain and leg muscles.



So you'll get fast, prevent injuries and increase strength. Win-win-win!

Fartleks: Simple Speed, Big Results

"Fartlek" is a Swedish word that means "speed play." Fartlek workouts are a fun introduction to faster running and can be structured or unstructured, depending on your preference. They can be added to any easy- or moderate-pace run, as well as your long runs.

With this low-key speed play, your body will begin to adapt to faster running with a reduced risk of injury. As you do more fartlek workouts, you'll be better able to shift gears and recruit different types of muscle fibers for your varied paces.

When first starting out, unstructured fartleks are a simple way to add some pace variation to your weekly runs and are sometimes referred to as "pickups." After you have warmed up with at least 15 minutes of easy running, simply pick a point in the distance (a mailbox or light post works well), and speed up until you get to that point. Run easy for several more minutes, and then repeat. You can easily add 6–8 of these during a run, and they can vary in length from 30–60 seconds or more.

Structured fartleks provide the same benefits as unstructured ones, but they are run for set intervals of time at more specific paces. These paces are typically run by feel rather than a precise number. Early in the season, a structured fartlek might include eight repetitions of 1-minute intervals at 10K effort with 2–3 minutes of easy jogging in between. There are endless varieties, including pyramid intervals and longer fartleks at varying paces, and these provide an excellent transition between base training and track workouts.

Fast-Finish Runs: Learning to Run Fast When Tired

Fast-finish runs are another type of fun, unstructured speed workout that introduces you to faster running. These runs follow your body's natural inclination to start slow and easy, then build up some speed as you head toward home. Like fartlek workouts, this provides an easy, positive foray into speed work and learning how to change gears on the fly.

The most important thing to remember with this type of run is not to overdo it! You may want to pick up the pace for the last mile or half-mile, depending on how you feel, but this is not the time to go all-out. These runs should be a controlled fast finish rather than an all-out sprint — save the more intense effort for another day. Done right, these should leave you feeling exhilarated, not exhausted, and itching to do just a little bit more.

You can pick up the pace for the last 400 meters or the last 3 miles, depending on your ability. But make sure the pace is sustainable to the end of your run and the effort is kept to a moderate or "comfortably hard" level.

Progression Runs: the Art of Suffering

Like a fast-finish run, progression runs also involve speeding up toward the end of a workout. But progression runs usually involve a longer, slower progression of speed, often over the last third or quarter of a long run. Like many of these introductory speed workouts, they can be more or less structured. Often they are run by feel rather than by set paces. Progressions are a great way to introduce some faster running, particularly if you are planning on training for longer distance efforts like a half-marathon or full marathon.

Progression runs are especially beneficial for teaching your body to run faster when fatigued. You can easily implement them into the final miles of a long run. If your current long run is 12 miles, run 9 easy, then run each of the last 3 miles slightly faster than the one before it. If your easy pace is 10 minutes per mile, your last 3 miles may be 9:45, 9:30 and 9:15.

This workout is particularly challenging compared with a standard fast-finish run because you have to run continually faster as you get more and more tired. It may not be fun, but it gets you in great shape before more formal, structured speed workouts.

How to Fit These Options into Your Routine

Given all the possibilities to ease into faster running, the question is how to fit them all in? There's a time and a place for each, but don't feel that you need to be running all of these workouts every week. Doing too many faster workouts is a surefire way to get a running injury, so let's avoid that pitfall.

Some workouts should be performed year-round, while others are meant to transition you into more race-specific workouts like track intervals and tempo runs.

Here are some simple guidelines to keep in mind when incorporating these efforts into your schedule:

- Strides: Run these year-round. Add them after your easy runs twice weekly.
- Hill sprints: Perform these once a week during your base phase and early in your training cycle.
- Fartleks: Unstructured fartleks can be run at any time but are best during your offseason or base-building phase of training. Structured fartleks can also be run weekly at any time during your training, but the length and pace of the intervals should be tailored to your specific race goals.
- Fast-finish runs: Run these on occasion for fun when you're feeling good and have a little extra pep in your step.
- Progression runs: These can be run once weekly year-round, but, like fartlek runs, they should be adjusted to become more race-specific depending on what you're training for.

Whether you're trying to gain fitness in the offseason or have your sights set on an upcoming race, now is a great time to start adding faster running to your routine. By gradually easing your way into speed work, you'll be ready to set some new PR's when race season arrives.

Learn more at simpleagain.com