

# Get More Out of Your Run

Stay the course—and gain muscle and speed—  
with these fresh ways to make the miles fly by.

*By Ashley Mateo*











**R**unning is, by nature, a repetitive sport. One 10-minute mile consists of 1,700 steps; run for 30 minutes, and you'd be forgiven for starting to wonder why exactly you signed up for such mindless monotony. And if you're running the same distance at the same pace every time you head out the door (or you're just slogging it out regularly on the treadmill), things can get downright b-o-r-i-n-g.

A good running program—whether you're training for a race, trying to get or stay in shape, or using it to manage day-to-day stress—revolves around variety. Some runs should be faster than others, some longer, and some should feel easy and conversational. And yet...so many runners are guilty of lacing up their sneakers and

going into autopilot mode. That's not how you improve, and it's a sure-fire way to lose motivation. Mixing things up keeps you physically and mentally engaged—and excited to clock more miles.

Ready to rethink how you approach your runs? These simple expert- and science-backed tips will help you beat the boredom factor and get more out of your miles.

### **PLAY WITH SPEED**

Running fast can seem intimidating, but no one's asking you to channel your inner Olympian. You don't even need a track. Instead, "use the landscape as your guide," says Ashlee Lawson Green, a certified running coach and cofounder and CEO of RUNGRL, an organization supporting Black female runners. "Pick up the pace between natural

landmarks, like light posts, benches, or tree stumps, or use stoplights as your stopwatch, running three to four blocks before resting at a red light." You can also follow audio cues, like running faster during each chorus of a song and slower during the verses or when the podcast host, not the guest, is talking.

This type of unstructured speed workout is called a *fartlek* (that's Swedish for "speed play"). "Even short bursts of 20 to 30 seconds where you're picking up the pace can add variety to your run," says Laura Norris, a certified running coach based in Colorado. Fartleks fall under the umbrella of interval training—workouts where you alternate spates of intense activity with periods of rest or recovery—which improves your health and makes you both faster and fitter in

*Going against gravity provides natural resistance, which forces more muscle activation.*

less time than steady-state cardio. In fact, a *PLOS One* study found that over three months with thrice-weekly workouts, as little as 1 minute of intensive exercise could have the same health benefits for the heart, respiratory system, and muscles as 45 minutes of more typical continuous exercise.

Quick-paced intervals (yes, even short ones!) help you get faster in the long run because “more intense efforts use a different energy system, which trains your body to deliver oxygen to the muscles more quickly for energy,” explains Norris. “They also train your fast-twitch muscle fibers, which will make it easier to keep running when your legs get tired.” Eventually, holding a faster pace for 30 seconds becomes easier—and when that shift happens, you can start increasing the length of your intervals.

## HEAD TO THE HILLS

Want stronger legs without having to pick up a single weight? Find an incline. “Running hills builds muscles in your calves, quads, hamstrings, and glutes—which leads to injury prevention and faster running,” says Meghan Kennihan, a certified running coach in Chicago.

Going against gravity provides natural resistance, thereby forcing more muscle activation and training your legs to generate more power than on a flat road, adds Norris. It also reduces the load on

your joints compared with running on a flat surface, lessening some of the effects of the repetitive impact.

Hills also offer you a way to increase the intensity of your workout without running faster. As you work against gravity, your heart rate goes up and you start breathing heavier—and that strengthens your heart and lungs. The stronger those muscles are, the better your aerobic capacity (a measure of how well the heart and lungs get oxygen to the rest of your muscles) will be, and the easier running will feel.

Not to mention, practicing going uphill can boost your confidence. Sure, you’ve got to work hard on the ascent, but “the reward of the view from the top translates to extra fuel in the tank when you’re back on flatter terrain,” says Green. In a study published in the *International Journal of Sports Medicine*, six weeks of two 30-minute hill workouts per week helped runners sustain faster speeds for 32 percent longer.

Getting comfortable with discomfort is one of the best things you do to become a better runner, especially as you start increasing your volume, and hills are an easy way to ramp up the intensity.

## CHANGE YOUR TERRAIN

You don’t need an expert to tell you switching up your running environment—even if that just means running your normal route in reverse—is more mentally stimu-

lating than running the same path over and over and over. Adding variety can also protect your body from injury.

Running is a linear motion, meaning you’re mostly moving forward in a straight line. But when you’re constantly running on smooth, flat surfaces like cement, pavement, or even the treadmill, it repeatedly taxes the same major muscles (quads, calves, ham-







Doing some of your runs on sand will challenge your leg muscles—in a good way.

strings), putting them under chronic stress that could eventually lead to overuse injuries, such as shin splints, runner's knee, plantar fasciitis, and iliotibial band syndrome.

"Varying the kind of ground you're running on forces different muscle groups to adapt," says Kennihan. Think about how much harder your legs would have to work while running on a surface like sand or

grass, for example (on the plus side, though, those softer surfaces put less stress on your joints and muscles). Meanwhile, navigating rocks and roots requires lateral, or side-to-side, movements that engage muscles you don't use as much for forward motion.

Those kinds of balance challenges "put a lot more work on the small stabilizer muscles in your lower body," points out Norris. The

more you involve the lesser-known muscles in your hips, around your knee, and in your feet—something that's not really possible on a flat road—the stronger they'll get.

With your newfound strength, those smaller muscles will not have to work as hard when you're logging miles on flat surfaces. "The less energy you waste," says Norris, "the more efficiently you run—and the faster you'll be able to go." ■