

A sports cardiologist's guide to running

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The weather's finally warming up, and you're eager to grab those dust-covered shoes out of the closet and hit the running path. But hold on just a second.

If you're jumping back in after a long winter's break—or running for the

first time—you need to pace yourself, says Sean Swearingen, MD, a sports cardiologist at RUSH.

"People should be aware that they are at a slightly increased risk of a cardiac event during the time that they're exercising," he says, "and the way to decrease that risk is a very gradual increase in activity."

So whether you're a newbie or a veteran runner, Swearingen offers these tips to help you avoid getting injured.

Cardio benefits vs. cardio risks

Not surprisingly, the [heart](#) specialist says [heart health](#) should be top of mind for all runners. He recommends wearing a device that can monitor your heart rate so you can observe the intensity of your workout, Swearingen says.

Workouts that max out around 60% to 80% intensity are more beneficial than higher-intensity workouts that can be overly strenuous to the heart and body, Swearingen says.

"A rough estimate of your age-predicted heart rate is 220 minus your age as your maximum heart rate. When exercising, staying in the 60% to 80% range should be the target," Swearingen says.

Like the muscles in our legs and abdomen that need to be strengthened gradually, your heart also needs to stretch and rest to get stronger, Swearingen says.

While there is a slightly elevated cardiovascular risk while exercising, doing it over the long term is beneficial for heart health at any age, he says.

Starting low and slow

New to running? For beginners, Swearingen recommends starting small and listening to your body. Your muscles aren't used to running, so you want to build their strength slowly to prevent strain.

1. Warm up: Warming up is pivotal to preventing injury. Take plenty of time to stretch your muscles so they're loose and ready to exercise, Swearingen says.
2. Take breaks: A good workout can include intermittent walking and rest breaks, Swearingen says.
3. Take rest days: Swearingen suggests running one day, and then taking the next day or two off. On off days, you can do strengthening exercises to help prevent injuries.

"These things will help beginner runners keep their form when they get tired later in a run, and it'll help build up endurance faster," Swearingen says.

Return to running

Between the pandemic and [cold weather](#), plenty of runners have fallen out of practice, so Swearingen recommends starting slow and gradually building the intensity of the workout. And like beginning runners, he suggests warming up and stretching, taking breaks and using off days for strengthening exercises.

Swearingen suggests looking online for stretching and exercise guides if you need some inspiration.

Experienced runners might have trouble achieving previous goals right

away, he says, but pushing yourself too hard leads to a greater risk of injury and muscle strain.

"It's frustrating not being able to exercise the way that you used to. Even if someone was an intense [runner](#) and hasn't run in a year or two ago, most of the development from before is going to be gone," Swearingen says.

Swearingen's advice: Aim for "small achievable goals." While it might take time to return to your personal best, setting smaller goals will help you recognize your accomplishments and see your growth.

Summertime suggestions

As the warm summer months approach, Swearingen stresses the importance of staying safe in the sun. Drinking water before, during and after a run is pivotal to keep your body from dehydrating. It also helps to eat a good meal before your run, to make sure you have plenty of fuel.

Humidity can make it more difficult for your body to cool down, because the moisture in the air doesn't allow sweat to evaporate the way it is supposed to, Swearingen says. Remember to take breaks and monitor your [heart rate](#) to prevent overheating.

Some people can tolerate heat better than others, but when the weather gets over 80 degrees, it can be better to take your workout inside or at least out of the sun.

"Pay attention to your body," Swearingen says. "Lightheadedness, muscle strains and heart racing are different ways your body can tell you to slow down and take a deep breath."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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