



7 important points for older runners

Running is a great way to stay fit and fight the pounds for all ages. However the downside to running is that it's a very repetitive, high impact exercise which can lead to a multitude of [overuse injuries](#).

As you grow older the elasticity in your muscles tendons, ligaments and joints decreases; so taking care of yourself becomes even more important! In the run up to the marathon season [Nkechi Odor](#), one of our expert Chartered Physiotherapists, has put together some useful tips to give longevity to your running life.

AM I AN OLDER RUNNER?

Before we begin you may ask the question, 'am I an older runner'? The majority of clinical articles and studies refer to older runners as 'master runners', which are those in the 40+ age group. Forty isn't very old in our opinion, but unfortunately this is when age related changes start.

1. NEW TO RUNNING?

Start with a walk/run program particularly if you are new to running or have had a long break. Older

runners have been found to have an increased rate of injury due to a delay in the repair of normal muscle wear and tear from training. Recovery times following training have also been found to drop.

Alternating walking/running is an excellent form of interval training, which delays the early onset of fatigue caused by continuous muscle activation. This allows time for the 'feel good' hormone – endorphins - to build up and reduces excessive stress on weak links in the body, enabling quicker recovery following training and reducing the risk of injury. You can progress by gradually increasing the speed and duration of the running phase while reducing the duration of the walking phase, until you are able to achieve prolonged running.

2. LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

As an older runner you may find that your performance has reduced over the years. Our heart and lungs undergo changes with age which affect performance. There is a 30 - 40% decline per decade in the maximum amount of oxygen the body can take up in the 40+ age group. This in turn means you may not be as fast or able to push through tough

sessions as before. It is important to train smart by setting realistic goals based on your current abilities and pacing yourself. You should still be trying to push your boundaries within reason, but ensure you listen to your body and know when to reduce your efforts.

3. STRETCH . . . STRETCH . . . STRETCH!!!

As we get older we tend to lose flexibility due to age related changes in our connective tissue. This reduced elasticity increases the stress in lower limb joints while running, in addition to a reduction in stride length and pace. So it is even more important to incorporate warm ups (either [dynamic stretching](#) or a slow jog) and stretching afterwards. Cool down or static stretching of the specific muscle groups used in running is essential - you will need to do this methodically after every run to prevent muscle tightness.

4. FOOD IS YOUR FUEL

Good nutrition is important for optimal functioning at any age. If you intend to become a life long runner, then eating like an athlete and adequate hydration will help you perform like one. Wholesome foods rich in essential micro and macro nutrients will help fuel your runs. Fresh fruit and vegetables will be of additional benefit as they are rich in antioxidants. Metabolism declines with age, so it is important to consider caloric content in foods; pick foods based on their nutrient quality and density as opposed to quantity.

5. PACE YOURSELF

Follow a structured weekly training program but listen to your body and know when to push yourself and when to rest. Make sure you have a rest day from running. With age we lose flexibility (as previously mentioned); muscle mass and strength; all of which can be improved by incorporating flexibility, strength and conditioning into your weekly program. For older runners, strength and conditioning is key to being able to continue to run injury free. Little and often goes a long way in injury prevention. 10 - 15mins of targeted exercises done 4 - 5 times a week goes a long way.

6. CROSS TRAIN

Cross train by incorporating low impact exercises into your training program such as swimming, pilates, cycling, cross trainer, weight training or rowing. This would be of additional benefit in improving overall body strength and reduce the risk of injury from repetitive loading while running.

7. BEWARE OF NIGGLES

Remain alert to the difference between post running soreness and a developing injury. Rate of injury in runners is 80% within a 12 month period, which is significant. Doing what you love repeatedly can cause you to have to stop. Hence avoiding injury is key. Injuries could be accidental – twisting an ankle; or most commonly due to overuse - achilles tendinopathy, plantar fasciopathy, medial tibial stress syndrome (shin splints), Patellofemoral pain, high hamstring tendinopathy, piriformis injury, lower back pain etc.

Often, adding repetitive loading to pre-existing biomechanical dysfunctions can cause excessive stress on these regions which in turn can cause injury. So don't be surprised if weak links which you've previously gotten away with start to become a problem with increased training. If you suspect an injury, particularly if symptoms are worse with running, rest and seek a Physiotherapist's opinion. Following treatment, avoid returning too early or too quickly.

In conclusion, although our bodies go through age related changes which can affect our running performance, there are strategies which can help maximise fitness and achieve our running goals while minimising the occurrence of injuries . . . age can be a state of mind, if we manage our bodies correctly.



Article by [Nkechi Odor](#),

Chartered Physiotherapist
MSc. Manual Therapy, BSc. (Hons)
Physiotherapy, MCSP, MHCPC, MACP,
MAACP