

How to vary your training

If you want to get fitter, you need to add some variety to your regime.

Steady running, at a comfortable pace, builds your aerobic base - the foundation for the rest of your training, as well as burning calories, strengthening your muscles, ligaments and tendons and helping your body become more efficient at taking in and using oxygen. You should be able to hold a conversation at this pace.

Easy runs/recovery running

An easy run is a slow run or jog during which you feel relaxed and can breathe easily. As a beginner, many of your first runs will be easy runs (although they might not always feel like it!), but they will continue to play an important part in your overall programme for two reasons: firstly, it's not possible to run hard all the time and secondly, easy running serves as active recovery.

Threshold running

Threshold or tempo runs are the best way of improving your running economy - your energy expenditure and heart rate at any given effort level. A more efficient economy will enable you to run faster for the same investment of effort.

The way to run these sessions is to find the pace that is just beyond your comfort zone, but not flat out. You will only be able to utter a couple of words at a time, and you'll need to stay 100% focused. Over time and with the right training, your threshold level will get higher and you will be able to run for longer.

The threshold referred to is the lactate threshold - the pace at which lactic acid builds up in the muscles faster than it can be flushed out, typically at around 85% of your maximum heart rate.

Long runs

Long runs are all about distance and building stamina or endurance. The idea is to gradually extend the duration, (rather than the speed) at which you cover distance. Your pace should be entirely comfortable. The duration varies according to your level of fitness and your goals. Start by adding between five and 10 minutes to your steady run distance, and gradually build up from there.

Interval training

Interval training entails running fast for relatively short bursts of time or distance on a pre-set schedule. The fast bit (effort) can vary from a few seconds to a number of minutes and you can change the amount of recovery, the pace of the efforts and the number of reps you do.

Fartlek

Fartlek means "speed play" in Swedish, and is a way of injecting variety into a training session by varying the pace at will, or in accordance with the terrain or your surroundings. For example, you could run fast between one park bench and the next and then jog to the next one. You could power up the hills, but take it easy on the flats. While Fartlek is similar to interval training in that it intersperses hard efforts with recovery, it is much less structured.

Hill training

Hill training builds leg strength as well as stamina. It can either involve running repeats up a particular hill and jogging back down again or running continuously over hilly terrain. The length and gradient of the hill or hills, or the total run time will determine the intensity of the session.