



**Previously: the long run**  
**This one: recoveries and injuries**  
**Next: how to run a race**

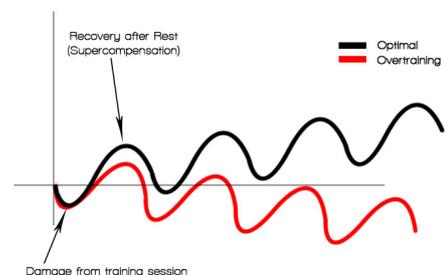
**It's time to address the unhappy subject of injuries. Unhappy, but perhaps inevitable. Elite and professional runners get injured, and they have a background of hard training, they probably do the core work and stretching, they may have frequent physio and massage, and their form may be near-perfect. So if they get injured, why wouldn't the rest of us? We're asking our bodies to do things they may not have done before, and we're probably not doing all those other elements (diet, good form, recovery) quite as well as we might.**

**So injuries can happen, and you should expect them to happen. Managing that situation in the right way is a huge part of successful marathon preparation.**

**[And while I'll mostly talk about how to respond to injuries, you can apply the same thinking to other 'setbacks' as well. Whether it's family issues, work pressures, missed sessions, rubbish weather, there are lots of other reasons why it may not be possible to train as you'd hoped.]**

## **Recovery matters**

Recovery is when you get fitter. During a session you're causing damage and stress on your body, and in order to increase your fitness you need to give your body the time and fuel to adapt. If you do that, your body will build back better.



Far more problems are caused by overtraining compared to undertraining, and if you speak with any coach, they'll say that a big part of their role is telling people that it's OK to ease off sometimes. We get so many questions about 'am I doing enough?' but a better question is 'am I doing too much?'.

So recovery should always be an important part of your plans, regardless of whether you feel you've picked up a niggle. Immediate recovery after a workout, easy days whenever you need them, and easier weeks after a hard block. Sleep, nutrition (especially protein), and real rest.

## Accept the injury

Of course, the best thing is to not get injured in the first place (by including plenty of strength and mobility work, by crosstraining rather than chasing mileage, by working on your running technique, and by mixing up speeds and surfaces). But there may be a point at which you have to say to yourself those fateful words – ‘I have an injury’. If you remember the wisdom of Mike Tyson, you might get a ‘punch in the face’, and if it happens, it happens. There’s no point pretending otherwise. But how you respond can make a big difference.

You need to distinguish between fatigue (heavy legs, feeling tired) and an injury. You’ll have to gauge that yourself, but essentially if it’s hurting, especially if it’s a sudden or sharp pain, then stop doing the thing that hurts. Denial isn’t helpful, getting angry won’t speed your recovery, it’s just part of the reality of being a runner. And the best runners are the ones who recover well, and who treat a setback as a tutor and as a coach, learning from it and becoming a better runner as a result.

## Immediate response

Other than stopping doing whatever it is that causes the pain, the standard response is often called RICE. Rest-Ice-Compression-Elevation. Stop causing the problem, take action to deal with pain and inflammation, and give your body the conditions and the time to heal itself.

The human body is remarkably good at fixing itself, but it needs the chance, and the time, to do so.



## Get help

I’m not a GP, a physio, or a sports masseur. But each of those can be useful, and can provide a diagnosis and some suggestions about the path to recovery.

So if you need expert help, get it – the web can be a scary place and once you start looking up ‘leg pain’ you can convince yourself you’ve got something terminal. Speak with someone who is qualified before you start wolfing down tablets or doing any specific rehab work. Unless it’s a re-occurrence of something you’ve had before, get checked out by someone who knows what they’re talking about.



The only slight extra advice here is that hopefully you would have a GP who is a runner, or who at least understands that in an ideal world, you would find a way of continuing to train in some form, rather than stopping completely.

## Look back and learn

Think about why you may have picked up the injury. Poor running technique? Over-training? The wrong shoes? Not enough flexibility? Or was it just 'an accident' – an uneven paving slab, a dog leaping out in front of you? Was it because you ran at night and didn't see an obstacle? Were you paying attention, or were you fiddling about with music or your watch? Any of those could have contributed to the problem. And then consider what you can do *now* to avoid that problem or situation for the future – new shoes, different routes, more core strength? What can you start doing, stop doing, or continue doing? Essentially, if you've done something stupid, try not to do it again, and stick to being sensible for the remaining weeks.

I wrote before about the idea of 'prehab' – making strength and mobility exercises a part of the routine without needing to have an injury first. Of course, runners don't really do them unless they are injured. So if you are given exercises to do, then do them. Seriously. Just the act of going to a physio isn't the thing that will cure your ills. You need to do the work, and keep doing it, even when the problem seems to have gone away. You'll build a stronger body for the long term and it's a wise investment.

## Focus on what you *can* do, not what you can't

Maybe you can't run for a day, a week, a fortnight. If you can't, you can't – that does not necessarily mean you throw away the idea of doing the marathon. There's no rush to make that decision.

So, what cardio training can you do, without causing unnecessary pain? How about swimming? Cross-training on a bike or rowing machine? Walking or cycling? What else can you do that would be helpful? Perhaps focus on your diet, on flexibility and mobility. Or perhaps now is the time to say thank you and to spend time with the people you've been ignoring when you've been going out of the door to run.



Any and all of these things may be perfectly possible, even if you can't run far or fast, or at all. And they will all help give you an improved chance of staying motivated and being ready to stand on the start line when it matters.

## Time is money

In the first of these notes, I mentioned the idea of a 'training budget' – an assessment of how much time you were prepared to put into getting yourself ready for the marathon. If you're injured, you now have some spare budget, because you're not using that time to go running. And perhaps the best thing you can do with that time is to raise some money.



Don't be afraid to share the fact that you've got niggles and that you're finding it tough. Be honest, of course – if you know you're definitely not going to be doing the marathon then say so. But as long as you have a reasonable chance of being there on the start line, use your time to talk to people and tell your story.

Running friends will understand the frustration of having an injury, and will know exactly what you're going through. They'll know that it's the preparation and training that are the hard part of the marathon, not the day itself. And non-running friends won't understand, unless you tell them.

Injuries and setbacks are annoying, of course. But they are a part of the journey, and dealing with them sensibly is part of how you 'earn' your sponsorship money.<sup>1</sup>

### **You can still race**

Well, perhaps not actually participate as a runner. But you can still learn about a race atmosphere, the pressure of the day, what it's like to feel the crowds around you. For many, if London is their first big race and they've never put themselves in that position before, it can be a massive shock to the system. But if you go and watch, you'll see what people do, the mistakes they make, the ways in which they manage themselves (or not). There are lots of races every weekend - it might be a local parkrun, it could be one of the many half-marathons that fill the calendar through March. Whatever it is, simply going to watch will be a useful experience.

And, more than that, why not volunteer? I promise you'll find it rewarding, and you'll be playing a vital role in helping others achieve their race, that day. You'll be earning a lot of good running karma, and some day, you'll get paid back.

### **Ease back into training**

The injury has happened, the sessions have been missed. That's reality. So don't try and 'catch up'. Don't leap back into where you were, or where you think you 'should' be. Whatever your plan was, as soon as the injury happened, it became irrelevant. So plan again. Whether that means you turn to Plan B, Plan C or whatever, keep revising the plan based on what you can do, not what you thought you would do.



Give your plan the injury, and re-plan with it included. Whatever sessions you thought you would be doing, they may not now be appropriate. If you're working with training zones, perhaps avoid 'red' and stick to 'blue' and 'green' until you feel able to handle the sharper stuff.

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<sup>1</sup> You might also find that you miss the buzz of exercise – the feeling of satisfaction after a training session or a race. Perhaps there's a substitute for that, in the feeling you'll get when someone makes a donation.

You have to work with the body you've got, so gradually get back into things at a frequency and intensity you can tolerate. And part of that is 'proprioception' – the sensations of your body as it moves. If you have some time not running then you might lose that, so make sure to include drills and technical work, to refamiliarise yourself with what it feels like to move well.

### **Should I still do it?**

Ultimately, only you can answer that, and you need to be honest about what you want from the whole experience. Remember, as long as you cover 26.2 miles on your own feet, you would have done the marathon. If your motivation is to complete the marathon (and raise vital money for charity) then as long as you can walk around in whatever time it takes (without giving yourself a serious problem) you would have succeeded and you could be incredibly proud of what you've done.

In contrast, if it's all about hitting a particular time, maybe you'd consider deferring. But what guarantee do you have that it will be different next year, or ever? And charity places don't defer back to the individual, they revert to being the charity's place. That means this one may still be your best shot, so don't bail out just because you might be a few minutes slower than you'd hoped (especially if you'd set that target by picking a semi-random number rather than one based on relevant information).<sup>2</sup>

The marathon is about so much more than a finishing time. And as a charity runner you've almost a duty to get to the start intact, and if you remember that, hopefully you won't push to breaking point in training. The best target is to be on the line injury free - if the finish time matters, there will be other days for that and London's a hard race at which to be fast. But just to be a part of the London Marathon on the day is an incredible experience, and if you're able to be there in some kind of shape to cover 26 miles under your own steam, then I'd definitely recommend you stick with it.

**Recovery is important, and without it, you won't get fitter. You should expect to spend a lot of time recovering, and you should aspire to being a great recoverer. But even if you're patient and give your body a chance, stuff happens.**

**That's reality, and while you should minimise the likelihood of such problems, it's not entirely under your control. If things get in the way of training, accept it, and realise that you still have choices in terms of your response. You can panic, get angry, or drop out. Or you can accept, learn, and adjust.**

### **The headlines:**

- **Take recovery seriously, whether it's from a session or an injury**
- **Focus on what you can do, and use your time productively**
- **Reset and replan from where you are, not where you 'should' be**

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<sup>2</sup> I've said before, and I'll keep saying, that poorly-set and tightly-held target times are a major source of problems, creating stress in preparation and stupidity on race day. The time to home in on pacing is closer to the day, because only then will you know how fit you are.