

RUNNER'S WORLD

Walk Breaks for Faster Running

No matter your running experience, slowing down (sometimes) can speed you up.

By Matthew Solan; Image by Joshua Simpson

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Seasoned runners often view walking as a sign of failure: You walk only when you can no longer run. But the truth is that periodic walking, in training and even in races, can help you run faster and better. "Walking reduces the impact forces on the muscles, joints, and tendons, and reduces breathing rate and heart rate," says running coach Jenny Hadfield, coauthor of *Marathoning for Mortals* and founder of coachjenny.com. "So runners are able to cover more distance with better form and alignment, and a reduced risk of fatigue."

WALK SIGNAL: You're fighting fatigue or leg soreness near the end of long runs or races. This often means you've gone out too fast, says Hadfield. To combat that tendency, walk early on. "Periodic walking can provide more overall rhythm with your pacing by making you slow down," she says. Taking walk breaks also lowers the impact on your body, which may prevent cramping. In fact, a study published this year in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* found that a mix of walking and running (in the range of 9:00 to 13:20 minutes per mile) helped runners conserve energy.

WALK THIS WAY: During your weekend long run, briskly walk for 30 to 60 seconds after every mile, no matter the overall distance, says Hadfield.

WALK SIGNAL: You're running fast intervals. Walking in between intervals instead of stopping to rest keeps your body ready to run. "Walking helps push blood back to the heart and muscles, which can reduce cramps and heavy legs," says Terry Nicola, M.D., M.S., assistant professor of clinical rehabilitation medicine at the University of Illinois—Chicago Sports Medicine Center. If you usually jog between intervals, walking instead can help you recover more completely so you can do your repeats faster.

WALK THIS WAY: After a hard interval, slow to a walk. As your heart and breathing rates fall, pick it up into a brisk walk for the remainder of the rest period.

WALK SIGNAL: You're tackling a giant hill. Whether your longest run or race is five miles or 50, taking walk breaks while going uphill can help you manage energy. "When you attack a hill, you often are exhausted when you reach the top," says Hadfield. "Walking up helps you avoid the crash-and-burn." You can make up the time on the downhill.

WALK THIS WAY: Running downhill stresses your muscles and joints more than running flats. Train your body to handle it with reverse hill repeat workouts, in which you walk uphill and run downhill. Sub out your regular hill workout for this one every other week.

WALK SIGNAL: You're taking in water or food. It can be challenging to eat or drink (and not spill) while you're running. But taking in 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrates every hour, and drinking when you're thirsty, can mean the difference between a runner's high and a bonk. Walking while refueling helps ensure that you're getting what you need to perform your best, says Hadfield.

WALK THIS WAY: During long runs, plug in brief walking breaks within 30 minutes of starting and every 15 minutes afterward, and use that time to either drink or eat. During races, take breaks at water stations. Practice good etiquette when downshifting: Run through the station and to the outside of the path, then call out, "Walking!" And thank the volunteers.

WALK SIGNAL: You're tensing up, shuffling your feet, or otherwise falling apart. If you struggle to maintain comfortable form during long runs, weaving in regular walking periods can help you reset. "Your brain gets lazy during long runs, which can make your form sloppy," says Tom Clifford, a Level 2 USA Track & Field Coach and owner of Without Limits in Wilmington, North Carolina. "You can begin to sway, plod, and scuff your feet." Periodic walking breaks can help you run more efficiently, and more comfortably.

WALK THIS WAY: Schedule a 30-second to one-minute walk every five to 10 minutes during your long runs. This is enough time for your brain to reset, Clifford says, while noting to keep it short: "if you walk too long, your heart goes back to rest." When you resume running, "practice your arm swing, a slight forward lean from your ankles, and a midfoot strike, and focus on relaxing your upper body."