

Good Running Technique

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In this article, we will look at common running technique mistakes to see how they can be overcome to give a more efficient running style.

Like finger prints, everyone has their own particular style of running which has developed naturally either by going out and putting one foot in front of the other or by attempting to mimic someone else. As running is relatively natural we can get away with levels of technique that would not be acceptable in other forms of exercise. For example, if running style was converted to swimming style, many runners would simply drown!

By looking for corrections in technique we can improve running economy, so it is certainly worthwhile spending some time analysing and, if necessary, making adjustments.

Basically, getting technique right is making sure you are working with, not against, yourself. The more adept you become at doing this, the more economical you will be and consequently the faster you should go.

Over-striding

Most recreational runners are guilty of over-striding, as are many younger runners - let's call it over exuberance! Also, we are often told to stride or stretch out - this can easily be mistakenly translated into over-striding.

Symptoms

There are three main symptoms of over-striding:

1. Your foot landing in front of your knee ('foot strike')
2. Landing on your heel ('heel strike')
3. Bobbing up and down ('bobbing')

Foot strike: If on landing your foot is in front of your knee, it is also in front of your centre of gravity. This will cause you to slow down because your foot hitting the ground is effectively a braking movement, so you will need more energy per stride than if you were able to keep your momentum moving forward. For a 40 minute 10 km runner, this can be over 7200 braking movements per race.

Heel strike: If you land on your heel, you could be extending your foot too far in front of you and again be over-striding. Work on your foot striking the ground directly under your knee. The tendency with those who are over-striding is to run very upright, which effectively constitutes running in front of your centre of gravity.

Bobbing: Another symptom is to bob up and down as opposed to moving forward in a straight line. Use a visualization technique when running to focus on not bobbing, by keeping your head travelling in a straight line. This should increase your efficiency and help you run faster and use less energy.

Eliminating over-striding

The speed that you run and length of stride should come from your rear end. When you push off from the ground, you should feel a slight stretch in your ankle and Achilles tendon area. The power from this phase, together with the speed you bring the knee and leg through, dictates the length of stride and speed of your running. With this running technique (or 'form'), you should feel as if you are pushing, not pulling, yourself along. In the upper body, a forward lean creates a feeling of falling forwards. The lean is from feet to head, not a bend at the waist, and is best described as someone holding you by a tie around your neck and pulling you towards them. The lean should be no more than 3-5'.

You should practise this position over short distances (100-200m) initially, then gradually continue to practise during longer periods of running. Try to continually focus on one of the corrective aspects during your runs, changing specific points every few minutes to keep momentum going. This should gradually lead to all the points gelling together.

By eliminating over-striding, you should see an increase in stride frequency (or 'cadence'). This is an area that again is very individual but as a rule of thumb, ideally you should be looking at a cadence of 90 steps per minute (counted for one foot) or more. Don't just try to achieve this on faster runs - try to practise the cadence you are trying to achieve by maintaining it on slower paced runs as well. This will avoid the feeling of plodding along and, by building stride frequency, will lead to a more efficient, faster running style.

Practice your running technique every time you go out - particularly when you are tired

Seated running

'Seated running' is when you run with your hips pushed back and bottom sticking out, frequently with a forward lean that wrongly comes from the waist. This can often arise as a fault from practising forward lean running, as well as being a fault in its own right. At its most extreme, this position can feel as if the full weight of your body is in front of your feet.

As seated running is very energy consuming, try to straighten your torso and consciously push your hips into a more forward position and feel your centre of gravity move backwards to a far more economical position. You should also feel much lighter on your feet.

Uneven arm movement

If your arms don't swing freely or evenly, it is often because they are compensating for some unnatural position or movement somewhere else - for example, compensating for tightness in the back. An uneven swing suggests that the torso may be twisting, consequently giving a sideways motion that detracts from forward movement. An early check on lower back tightness is recommended in this situation. To do this, sit on the floor with legs extended in front of you. Make sure your feet are about 20 cm apart. Take a good breath and as you exhale, reach forward with your hands together and bend as best you can from the waist (not by curling the shoulders forward). If you are unable to reach past your heels, regular stretching exercises for the hamstrings and back would not go amiss. If you do this for a few weeks, you are likely to see an improvement in your arm movement as the back and hamstrings reach a greater range of motion.

When running, aim for a 110-120 degree angle bend in the arms.

Tight shoulders

Keeping the upper body relaxed is easier said than done. Once tension creeps into the upper body, your energy consumption will increase leaving less energy for running faster. Remember, all your energy comes from one fuel tank which supplies all parts of the body!

Signs of this can be an appearance of having no neck when running, or feeling the shoulders tensing and rising up as you become tired. Once the shoulders tense, the tendency is for a less fluent arm swing that leads to a shorter, less productive, higher energy consuming running stride.

One simple way of keeping the upper torso relaxed is to focus on the lower jaw. Maintaining a hollow, loose feel to the lower jaw tends to help keep the upper body relaxed. Again, this is easy when in low intensity, relaxed states but takes more practise and focus when running in a fatigued or pressured state.

Head position

A head rolling from side to side or bobbing up and down doesn't help to create a stable running technique. Focus your eyes on the ground about 15 to 20 metres ahead and lift your head occasionally to see what is coming up. While you need to make sure your next steps will be safe ones, try to look around you and take in what you see - its much more exciting than the ground a few steps in front of you!

Breathing

The way we breathe plays an important role in how we can run, as we need both to take oxygen in, and exhale carbon dioxide. By not taking proper breaths, we limit the amount of oxygen we can take up and the amount of carbon dioxide we can expire. Shallow breathing is associated with a feeling of breathing from the chest area and short breaths when inhaling and exhaling.

Shorter breathing patterns tend to lead to tightening up and tension - it can be likened to walking around breathing through a straw when you could be breathing normally!

You should aim for a feeling of breathing from your belly with a much deeper, stronger movement involving a long exhalation before inhalation. This style of breathing makes proper use of the diaphragm, the muscle which assists with breathing, which is situated between the chest and abdomen.

Working on belly breathing should be something you adhere to in all runs to build up the specific endurance capacity of those muscles involved in the process. It will then be easier to maintain when breathing becomes heavier during more intense exercise.

Conclusion

By analysing you technique (ask your running partners how you look, if you cannot get videoed or run on a treadmill in front of a mirror) and working to improve your form should make you a more efficient and faster runner.