

Hill-Work

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To many runners, hills spell trouble. Fortunately, much of that sentiment is more in their heads than their legs. Running hills is an acquired skill, and a little practice can give any runner the confidence to overcome a hill phobia and make peace with the dreaded incline. And not least, a consistent regimen of hill workouts goes far to build leg strength.

The rather obvious benefit of hill workouts is that they make you better at running hills. Even better, you will see benefits on the flats, too. The muscle groups you use to overcome hills are virtually the same as those you use for sprinting, so hill-work enhances your speed by building strength. This strengthening effect is supplemented by the fact that hill workouts help increase both the frequency and length of your stride -- you get even faster. As a final added bonus, hill training also strengthens the muscles around your knees, helping to reduce knee injuries.

You should, however, be cautious about hill-work if you have an injury in your calf or achilles tendon. Even if you do not, you should still be sure to warm up on the flat before hitting the hills and to stretch these areas of your legs especially well post run.

While many runners build their hill sessions around running sprint repeats on one hill, there's no particular reason that you should stick to this. Running a rolling course with numerous hills will also do the trick while adding the change of scenery that makes running so pleasurable. Wherever you choose to run, make sure that the course will give you the opportunity to run at least five or six hills 200 yards long or more.

Remember that the idea of hill work is to negotiate the hills efficiently, with as little disruption as possible to your rhythm. Think of yourself rolling over the hill, almost as if it isn't there. Concentrate on keeping your upper body relaxed, while you let your legs do the work.

On gradual inclines, try to run a bit harder than you had been running on the flat before the hill. On steeper inclines, concentrate on lifting your knees and pushing off hard with every step. This attention to your "vertical" motion is at least as important as your forward motion up the hill. The steeper the hill, the more you should lift your knee; on the steepest inclines try to lift your knees so high that your thighs reach horizontal. The strong push-off and high knee lifts will increase both your stride length and the range of motion in your hips: voila, you've increased your speed.

Even for very long hills (a mile or longer), try to maintain the exaggerated knee lifts. The benefits will make themselves known soon enough. The knee lifts, incidentally, are not easy. But even with the extra workout, your legs take less of a pounding running uphill than when running hard on the flat or downhills - you're not hitting the ground as hard.

As you reach the top of each hill, focus on running all the way over the top until you reach the flat, and pick up your regular running rhythm again. Use the flat or downhill on the other side for recovery. As always during the easy portion of any speedwork, keep running - even if at a gentle jog.

Go carefully on the downhills - they can dish out a nasty pounding, particularly to your quads. The best way to run downhills is to lean into them, to the point that you feel you're about to fall on your face. Try to get your legs turning over as fast as you can with short, quick strides. Not only does this help reduce the pounding on your legs, but it also helps you increase your stride frequency. With a little practice, you'll find yourself running down hills with less effort, less pounding, and more speed. Not a bad combination.

Those just beginning hill workouts will likely find hills a struggle at first, but before long hills become more of a friendly challenge than a mortal enemy. The more you run hills, the more you'll find yourself adjusting to them automatically and your stride shifting to "hill mode" without any thought or effort.