



# Improve your running

**Whether you are a relative newcomer to running or are training for your umpteenth race, you may think that, fitness aside, running comes as naturally as breathing or eating.** It's true to an extent that everyone has their own running style and pace. However, this may not necessarily be the best technique for improving your endurance and speed, or for minimising your risk of injury, says Chinnor based personal fitness trainer, Hilary Westall. This is because we are not born with good running technique – like other skills, it must be learned.

When people run with poor technique, they put undue stress on their body and run at a slower pace. They may suffer pain and premature fatigue, which will prevent them from progressing and may well result in injury or giving up altogether if they are not enjoying themselves.

The aim of running is to propel your body forward as quickly and efficiently as possible. Any energy used that doesn't contribute to this is simply wasted energy, as seen with the following common problems:

## • Heel striking / leaning backwards

These two often go together, since leaning backwards or running too upright means your foot strikes the ground in front of your centre of gravity, pulling you backwards. Ideally your whole body needs to lean slightly forwards to propel you along, using the backs of the thighs (hamstrings) as your 'accelerators'. A backwards or upright posture will slow you down by primarily using the fronts of your thighs (quadriceps), which are your 'brakes', and can put undue strain on your lower back.

## • Arms and shoulders

If your arms swing laterally across your body while running, you will be twisting your whole body from the shoulders, which is inefficient and could lead to joint problems. Your shoulders should be square and level and your arms should swing forwards and backwards in the direction you are travelling. Tight shoulders and arms can also restrict your breathing, so try to keep them loose and relaxed. Keep shoulders back and avoid rounding them as this will also restrict your breathing.

## • Head position

Hold your chin up with your eyes focused forwards to a point on the ground about 30 metres ahead of you. Imagine you have a piece of string tied to the top of your head pulling you upwards, lengthening your spine, and try to 'run tall'.

Though not specifically technical features, there are two other areas to work on that will improve your running and make it a more enjoyable experience:

## • Core stability

The action of running transmits a large amount of force up one leg, through the pelvis and up the spine. For efficient transmission, the pelvis needs to remain rigid and horizontal and for this to happen, the core muscles that keep the pelvis rigid are essential for maintaining good running form. Core stability training should form part of your overall exercise programme and can be developed through Pilates or with the help of a suitably qualified trainer.

## • Breathing

In my own experience as a runner, and through seeing clients benefit from the advice, getting into a breathing rhythm when running can make a huge positive difference. After years of doing it, I cannot imagine breathing out of rhythm, no matter what the speed or distance, yet many runners breathe haphazardly, which can be an uncomfortable waste of puff! Try to breathe out for two steps, in for two steps; out for two, in for two, and so on. When running at a warm-up or slower than normal pace, you could breathe out for three steps and in for two, increasing to two/two as you warm up. It may feel unnatural at first but it really is worth persevering with until it becomes second nature. Control of your breathing will help your body get enough oxygen to fuel it, and you will experience a smoother, more enjoyable run as a result.

## Checking your technique

To find out how you run, it's worth getting on the treadmill where you can see yourself in the mirror so that you can watch what you do. Better still, enlist the help of a suitably qualified running coach to take a look at your running



*In this issue, Chinnor-based personal fitness trainer, Hilary Westall, runs through some fitness advice*

style. This is not the same as gait analysis, widely available now in many running shops, where your foot strike is analysed by computer to find you the most suitable trainers – whilst useful for corrective footwear, it won't check you out from the ankles upwards!

## Think about how you are running

As you run, try to be body-aware: How am I feeling generally? Are my shoulders relaxed? What's my breathing like right now? Do I feel like I am plodding or light on my feet? Check yourself at regular intervals and make any necessary adjustments. Like any learned skill, it may at first feel strange to run differently to how you are used to, but with practice and determination it will become habit – and will hopefully keep you running for years to come.

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