

Reap All of the Benefits from Running

by Anthony J. Wall, MS, ACE, PT

Running is a trend that continues to grow in the U.S. In 2013, more than 30 million people ran at least once per week. The simplicity and effectiveness of a running program as a form of aerobic conditioning, weight management and athletic conditioning makes this type of activity appealing to such a broad audience. As a form of activity – and as a mode of transport – running is an inexpensive option for someone interested in becoming more active. At a more basic level, human beings are designed to move.

To this day, there are small populations of groups around the world that still lead a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. For these populations, being active and being able to run are necessary survival skills to be able to secure food and avoid danger. For most people, however, we live in a society where running is no longer necessary for basic survival, but used as a form of recreation or competition.

HOW WE LEARN TO RUN

It's important to understand that running is skill. Like most skills, to be proficient in it and to prevent injuries, we need to understand how to do it correctly. For many adults, the skill of running has been lost from years of inactivity or little running. Through the natural process of human development we learn at a young age to crawl, stand, walk, run and then sprint. Kids love to run and often run everywhere, but if we don't maintain a running lifestyle, the skill can be lost.

Years later as an adult, we decide to 'get back' into running, and if we've lost the skill, we need to retrain our body and our brain in how to perform the skill effectively and efficiently. One of the first keys to injury-free running is to understand the impact that a well-structured running program can have and the impact a poorly-designed program can have as well!

CARDIOVASCULAR EXERCISE

The question is often asked – how long do I need to run to get some benefit? We need to answer another question as well: how fast are you going to run?

While time or 'duration' is important, intensity is also a factor that can be manipulated. In general terms, one's training session will be dictated either by its duration or its intensity. In other words, we can either run for a longer time at a lower intensity or we run for a shorter time and manipulate our intensity to create an appropriate training effect.

An example of this would be running up a hill and walking back down, and repeating that combination a number of times or running on a trail that consists of hills. These sessions would feel quite different from running at a constant pace on a flat road. In this article, we are going to discuss lower intensity running as we are focusing on the trend of running as for the general public – opposed to the trend of higher intensity style training.

Our bodies are designed to be stressed. When we pick up a heavy object or run up and down a flight of stairs, we are stressing the body. When we increase our heart rate, we are exerting a stress on the body. The body's muscles and organs have the ability to adapt to physical activity. We adapt in certain ways to certain types of activity or stress. It is this amazing ability to adapt to physical activity that allows us to adjust to an activity, and over time we see this adjustment as "getting more fit."

This adaptation is also one of the reasons we can plateau if we don't change up a program from time to time. While there are number of physiological changes that the body goes through, the general outcome is that we feel "more fit," or "stronger." If we understand this concept of adaptation, we can then begin to explore the question of how long we need to run to gain a benefit.

As soon as we start running, our bodies start the process of adapting to the activity. These adaptations are not generally observed or measurable until at least two to three weeks into a well-structured program.

The traditional measurement in aerobic training is the “VO2 max.” VO2 max can be thought of as the maximum amount of oxygen a person can use each minute. This can be defined as a person feeling as though they can run faster or longer for a given period of time. Physiologically, there are a number of adaptations happening in the body – the outcome is that we are getting “more fit.”

THREE MAIN COMPONENTS OF A RUNNING EXERCISE

There are three main components of a training session – the warm-up, the conditioning phase and the cool down phase.

The warm-up should typically last 5-10 minutes and will include some low-to-moderate intensity activities. The warm-up could include some running or walking to benefit the cardiovascular system, and could also include some movement and mobility type activities if the individual wishes to have a more comprehensive warm-up. An experienced individual may also include some brief bouts of a higher intensity activity if it fits in with their goals.

In some circumstances we can do a very gradual warm-up with the intensity of the conditioning phase, being such that there isn't really a big difference in the feel of the two phases. An example of this would be starting out on a flat road, and simply walking or running more slowly, then gradually speeding up. The cool down phase would reverse the warm-up phase.

The other option is to have a gradual warm-up, and then a more pronounced conditioning phase. In this example, the conditioning phase following the warm-up would be noticeably more challenging. Running up a hill would provide the most challenging increase at the start of the conditioning phase. Both are examples of effective ways to progress through a training session, and the individual can choose the most suitable method based on their experience and training ability. When in doubt about which method is best for you, err on the side of caution and start slowly.

While we have recommended guidelines on aerobic training, these guidelines should be considered in conjunction with an individual's current fitness level and their individual goals and needs. Our goals should always come first and then we can use these guidelines to define the program.





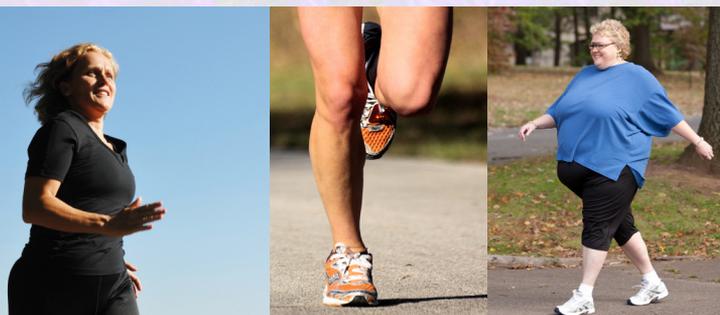
GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR CARDIOVASCULAR ACTIVITY

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provided a comprehensive list of recommendations for aerobic exercise. The recommendations follow evidence that health benefits will occur with at least 150 minutes a week of moderate to intense aerobic activity, or 75 minutes per week of vigorous to intense aerobic physical activity.

If an individual completes at least 150 minutes per week of aerobic activity, they can expect to see health benefits. These activity minutes can be completed in as little as two days, however current recommendations suggest completing some form of activity can be more beneficial when completed on a minimum of three days per week. Additional benefits can be obtained if more exercise is accomplished above the recommended 150 minutes per week. In combination with these recommendations, we also use the American College of Sports Medicine's guidelines that address frequency and intensity as well.

These guidelines work well for many individuals who participate in running activities as many of those people who run regularly use some form of a heart rate monitor. If an individual wishes to run on a minimum of three days per week, they should exercise at a vigorous intensity, equating to less than 60 percent of their heart rate reserve. If they participate in this activity on a minimum of five days, then the intensity is reduced to between 40 – 60 percent of their heart rate reserve, or a moderate intensity to get the same amount of health benefits.

The heart rate reserve is one of the accepted methods used to determine intensity, and it considers both one's maximal heart rate and their resting heart rate. While all heart rate formulas have a margin of error, they provide a more simple method to estimate intensity and are good to use as a general guide. There are also other methods to gauge intensity. We recommend finding one that fits your goals and to use that method, and over time you'll become more proficient in understanding your heart rate and how to increase or decrease your workout intensity to get the desired effect



CONCLUSION

To find out how long you need to benefit from running, we would need to know quite a bit more information about you, your body and your fitness goals. We do have some well-established minimums for health benefits, but the first step is to determine what you wish to accomplish. If your goal is to improve your overall health, then we can use the recommended guidelines as a roadmap to either work toward or start from. As you become more experienced, you can start to manipulate your intensity and duration to provide a great challenge and workout to yourself.

If you're new to running, starting with two sessions a week is a good place to begin with at a more moderate intensity. Slowly build up to 150 minutes of activity per week. For many individuals starting out with 5-10 minutes of walking or running, each session is sufficient. You can then build from there each week as they feel more comfortable.

Remember, running is a skill that needs to be practiced and mastered. Adopt a realistic, sensible approach to your running, and the benefits will come. Intensity is a very important aspect of any exercise program, and needs to be covered in a more comprehensive fashion.

About the Author:

As the Director of Professional Education for the American Council on Exercise (ACE), Anthony J. Wall, MS, ACE, PT, oversees all continuing education courseware development including live workshops, webinars and online courses. Wall's strategic leadership sets the course for ACE professional education.

With more than 20 years of experience in the fitness industry, Wall shares his expertise at industry workshops and conferences around the globe. He is often used as an expert within the media in a variety of respected national outlets including The Washington Post, The Good Life Magazine, Real Health Magazine, Women's Health and more.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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