



How to race your best 5k

A 5K is a great way to challenge yourself to reach your goals. Whether you are looking to increase your speed, lose weight, or finish your first race, the 5K (3.1 miles) is a great distance to push yourself a bit, and most importantly, have fun!

For runners who are new to running, it is sometimes difficult to know what to expect in a 5K race and for more experienced runners, it is easy to be dismissive of your training or train the same way as you would for a longer race. Here are five tips to help you reach the finish line, hit those goals, and run your best 5K.

Establish a baseline

Before you jump right into running or setting a goal and training for a 5K race, it is important to know what you are working with. For beginner runners, this might mean building up an aerobic base using the run-walk method. Beginners should not worry about the kilometres or miles you run at first, but rather focus on the amount of time you can run continuously. It is crucial to remember to be patient and build up your running slowly to avoid injury. Remember, don't get frustrated! Every run (no matter how fast or slow) makes a difference and is helping you work towards that final goal.

For more established runners setting your baseline means discovering how fit you are at the moment. A great way to do this is by running a fast 5K at the beginning of your training to help you set an appropriate goal and understand the paces you should try to hit throughout your training. If you know you are injury-prone or have been taking some time off, it might be best to spend four to six weeks slowly building up a strong base.

Both beginners and those who are injury prone or coming off an extended break from running will want to be conservative in your early training. Consider cross-training as well to help build up your level of fitness while avoiding too much impact — remember staying happy and healthy should be the primary goal.

Set a goal and work toward it

Once you've established your base-level goal it's helpful to set a goal for your race. Whether that is to finish, to set a new PR, or just simply to get out there and celebrate being a part of the running community, every goal requires some degree

of preparation. A training plan is an extremely helpful way to help keep yourself on track and ensure that you are progressing. Remember to make sure your goal is realistic whilst challenging yourself at the same time. For example, if you can run a 29 minute 5k without much specific training challenge yourself to get to 27 minutes. Setting a target of 22 minutes would perhaps be unrealistic. Good targets are also time bound. I can run a 27 minute 5k. So, in 6 months I will aim to complete a 5k race in 25 minutes.

The plan should also be appropriate for your current level of fitness. For brand new runners, this might include running and walking, and should focus on building up your fitness and confidence running for longer periods of time.

For more experienced runners, a good plan will consist of one or two more difficult speed-focused workouts, a longer endurance-focused run, and easy runs balanced with plenty of rest and recovery in between. Following all of the clubs training sessions will provide that balance. Remember difficult workouts should never be completed back to back and you should always include easy runs, cross-training, or recovery, between speed workouts and long runs.

Now you're not going to magically jump from 27 minutes to 25 (not without working hard) and it's going to be a series of incremental improvements, rather than a sudden huge PB. Even if you go faster by 10 seconds each week, that's going to be a minute dropped every 6 weeks.

Don't forget your core

Surprise! Running is about more than just running! Developing a strong core and other supporting muscles can be really helpful in preventing injury and allowing you to run faster during those all-important speed workouts. Incorporating even just a few strengthening exercises into your routine can make a huge difference and really come in handy on race day as your body is more fatigued at the end of the race.

Run more

If you want to run faster at a distance of 5k then a mixture of speed work and longer distance is required. You need to get a good 'base' of running down as this gets your body used to running – your muscles will get more efficient, your heart will get better at pumping blood around your body, the ligaments, tendons and muscles will get stronger and YOU will feel more confident and more like a 'runner'. Increase the number of miles you run per week by 10% a week. So if you run 15 miles a week, up that to 16.5 and so on. Again, gradual progression is key to avoid injury or illness.

Run faster

If you want to run faster - run faster! You need to teach your body to run at the pace required to hit your target time. This can be done through speed sessions comprising 5k broken down in the shorter, faster segments. This could be one of our 5x1km with 2 minutes rest between, 6x800m with 90 sec rests or 12x400m with 1 min rests.

Our weekly Fartlek session is a little more informal and a great way to easily introduce a little speed to your regular run. Swedish for 'speed play', Fartleks mean throwing faster sections into your normal run.

Don't miss our hill training

Resistance training such as hill repeats are often touted as the best way to improve your running as they work everything hard. They are great disguised speed sessions. At the club we rotate our hills sessions using a mixture of long, medium and short hill repeats.

Running hills also forces you to adapt good running form, lifting your knees higher and driving with your arms.

Warm up before

It's so tempting on a cold winters's day to sit in the car with the heaters on, before reluctantly going to the start line at the last minute. But they say the shorter the run, the longer the warm up needed.

Warming up your body with a easy jog, dynamic stretching and some little sprints will get your heart pumping, your muscles warmed up and have you raring to go at the start line - rather than yawning.

Nutrition

Nutrition has more of an effect for longer runs (over 60 minutes) than shorter distances like 5k however, what you eat before-hand can make a difference. Try to eat a light breakfast, just enough to keep hunger at bay - save your proper brekkie for afterwards. You'll really notice a full stomach when trying to go at 5k pace, especially if you're pushing for a PB. Also, ditch the water bottle - you don't need it for 5k and it's just extra weight to carry.

Cool down

As much as you may want to get on with whatever you have to do after your workout, your body will thank you for taking the time to stretch out a little and thank it for all the hard work you just accomplished. Leg swings are great for maintaining hip mobility and shaking out the legs and some light static stretching will make a difference as you get closer and closer to race day and you are running further and more regularly.

Pace yourself and have fun

Whether you are a seasoned expert or brand new to running, it is easy to get caught up in all the excitement and emotion at the start of a race. Remember to stick to your plan, take deep breaths, and run your race! Adrenaline can be powerful (especially if you're chasing a new PB), but keeping yourself in control and trusting your training will make a world of difference. It might be difficult, and

you may face some challenging moments along the way but remember that this is your moment, and every step of the way you're working towards that goal.

There are many different ways to approach pacing a 5k. There is the go out hard and hang on. You run the first two miles 10-12 secs per mile quicker than your target pace. This is a technique often used by less experienced runners and once at 2 miles if things do start going pear shaped it won't be a complete disaster! Alternatively there is the even paced 5k where you stick to your target average pace throughout and perhaps look to put a push in the final 400-600m. For more experience pd runners the use of a negative split strategy can be most productive. This is where the second half of the race is run faster than the first half. Know what your average target pace is, set off for the first mile 5-10 seconds per mile slower and then crank it up progressively to the finish.

Experiment with pacing and see what works best for you. Use parkruns as a means of practicing.

Most of all, enjoy it!