

# COUCH POTATO TO MARATHON CHAMP: YOUR GUIDE TO THE PERFECT RUNNING FORM

<https://www.roadrunnersports.com/blog/proper-running-form>

*It's always a good idea to brush up on your running form. Read this 10-step guide to the perfect running form and make every step count.*

With these tips in mind, you're well on your way to running success. From a [tempo run](#) to a fartlek, there's no type of run you won't be able to tackle.

Is running innate? It was hardwired into our species for survival and most of us picked it up naturally as kids—no coaching required.

Nonetheless, a quick Sunday morning drive will show you plenty of giraffe-like gaits and shuffling zombies who illuminate the fact that many humans are, plain and simple, bad at running.

Maybe they're [running with dogs](#), are just plain tired, or don't even realize their hands flopping around. All the same, one thing is for sure: their form is bad.

Elite runners and novices both need to learn how to run properly. With good form, running will feel less tiring and more enjoyable—something everyone can get behind. We're here to give you the breakdown on how to run properly in just 10 simple steps.

If you want to learn how to run faster, more efficiently, and with minimized risk of running injuries, these 10 steps are the ticket to get you there.

The correct running form is easy to learn and you have nothing to lose, so let's check those excuses at the door and see what you can gain by making a few tweaks to your stride.

## Proper Running Form

We're going to take a look at the proper running form from the ground up. Keep in mind that in order to learn how to run correctly, you'll need to layer each of these 10 steps on top of each other, building on proper running form as you go.

Try identifying and correcting each element of your stride one piece at a time—versus all at once—so you can isolate the problem and establish new muscle memory before giving your body too many tasks to process.

## 1. Feet

Above all else, we can't stress enough the need to deck your feet in the best running shoes; running in basic sneakers will put you in for a world of hurt, trust us. If you're gearing up to practice and perfect repetitive impact on those feet, treat them with the kindness they deserve in running shoes that deliver premium shock absorption, cushioning, and structured support. You'll train harder, for longer, and feel significantly less stress afterwards.

Not sure how to find the perfect running shoe for your body's biometrics? Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

Choose the best running shoes for the terrain you'll run most. Road shoes are great on flat pavement, but trail running shoes are designed to withstand tougher terrain.

- Depending on the shape of your arches, find a running shoe that will accommodate the necessary support you need.
- If you roll your heels in or out when you run ([overpronation or supination](#)), buy a running shoe built for stability or motion control to protect against injury.
- Select your size correctly; it's the key to ensuring your shoes are as comfy as possible. Our Fit Experts recommend going up a half size when making your selection.

Investing in some of the [best running shoes for men](#) and [running shoes for women](#) is one of the smartest decisions you can make.

## Where to Strike Your Foot When Running

Once your feet are equipped with the proper athletic footwear, step one is perfecting your foot strike. Your "foot strike," or the position in which your foot lands on each step, is a hotly contested subject in the running community. [Human Kinetics](#), for example, advocates the use of a mid-foot strike. However, the minimalist running craze ignited by the author of *Born to Run*, [Christopher McDougall](#), swears by a forefoot strike that mimics [running barefoot](#) like our ancestors.

Whether you choose to strike your midfoot or forefoot comes down to preference and comfort. Learn more about [foot strikes here](#).

**Note:** New runners in particular should be careful not to over-stride. To run in good form, your foot should land below your hips—not out in front of you.

## 2. Calves and Shins

Your calf complex muscles work together with your feet to create push-off. Push-off is the primary action necessary to supply the explosive force that moves you forward when running, and when done correctly, moves you forward horizontally instead of up and down. The push-off force comes from a powerful contraction in the calf which then triggers the ankle joint extension. This movement, called dorsiflexion (DF), occurs when the toes move closer to the shin, curling upwards, shrinking the distance between dorsum (top) of the foot and the leg.

DF happens thanks to the front part of your shin that lifts your foot (anterior tibialis). It's a relatively simple movement that can create a ton of problems when performed poorly; remember, running is a kinetic chain, and anything that happens at the ankle intersection can carry up, affecting the knees, hips, back, and more.

Poor DF in your legs may cause runners to experience a loose or floppy foot, resulting in poor pressure distribution—say hello to shin splints and runners' knees galore. When done poorly, it may also reduce the ability to utilize and supply the power from the posterior chain necessary for good running form.

The bigger, stronger muscles in the calf come naturally to most people, but DF is less natural and lacks from most recreational running gaits. It's less common in jogs at slow speeds, but becomes more important as additional force is applied. The contraction contributes to proper foot strike, shock absorption, injury prevention, and push-off; it reduces the time between ground contact on your stride, helping you run faster and more efficiently. If you're pushing to become better and learning how to run in perfect form, perfecting this movement is step number two.

Fitness experts say runners should aim to have at least 15 degrees of DF to be within normal limits, so begin by first paying attention to this muscle contraction before you begin to strengthen it. At first it might feel strange, but soon it will become second nature. DF can be improved by manual therapy (self-massage) and physical drills such as:

- Walk on your heels and keep your toes pointed upwards for 20:00 x 3, using your arms as you would running.
- Stand on one leg, lift one knee to a 90 degree angle where it's parallel with your hips, flex the toes of your raised leg with arms in running position, leg firmly planted, and glutes engaged. Repeat for 3 sets before switching sides.
- Use a resistance band looped around your foot and a stable object to flex and pull your toes back and forth for :20 x 12, in 2-3 sets.

### **3. Knees**

After dorsiflexion and push-off take place, the free (swing leg) knee is driven forward via hip flexion. Your knee drive is what supplies additional forward momentum, making your body feel like its effortlessly propelling you forward, step-by-step. On top of that, it plays an important role in maintaining or increasing stride length.

Your stride length goes hand in hand with your cadence or stride rate (the number of steps you take per minute with both feet). Fitness pros clock the perfect cadence in at 180 steps per minute (spm), but this isn't a hard number—more of a general guideline. You want your cadence to be at least 180 spm, but over and over, top runners maintain consistently high cadences—and so should you.

Why? Simple; with a shorter, faster stride, you “bound” less, reduce the stress associated with longer, impactful strides, and become more efficient. A high cadence forces runners to bring their feet more directly under them versus out in front, thereby reducing running injuries caused by overstriding. In short, you'll run faster and get hurt less often.

To increase your stride rate or cadence for proper running form, you first need to establish a baseline.

- Go for an easy run on flat terrain at a moderate pace.
- Count the number of times your foot hits the ground within 1:00. Double this number to account for both feet.
- Aim to increase your amount of strides per minute by 5-10% every two to three weeks until your cadence is between 180-200 spm for proper running form.

Increasing your stride rate and speed depends on lifting your knees higher. If you're struggling to achieve the correct running form, try doing some high-knee drills on the track or in the gym.

#### **4. Thighs**

The higher you lift your thighs, the more energy you'll send back down into your landing. Similar to a bouncy ball, the harder you throw it down, the higher it'll bounce back up—and the less energy you'll exert with each motion. Don't lift too high though; you want to move forward horizontally, not vertically.

If you're learning how to run properly, paying attention to the quads in your thighs is important. That “dead-leg” feeling of fatigue you know so well is caused by weak quads; when these muscles are strong, they help power you up hills and launch you forward on every step.

That said, being overly reliant on your quads can cause big problems. It can wreck your knees, impede your performance, and hinder your body control. Although they're big muscles and ready to put in the work, you don't want the quads to carry the torch while running. If you do, it can screw up posture and proper alignment by creating a tight low back and hip flexors, with weak abdominals and glutes.

To avoid quad domination and dependency, switch your running technique from a push to a pull stride. This activates and draws power from your hamstring and glutes, which are stronger, more durable, and better for long-term running health. They can handle a more significant workload, create a better body balance, and cause you to fatigue less quickly. If you learn [how to breathe when running](#) and how to activate your power muscles, your endurance will improve tenfold.

On top of that, pulling from the hamstrings in your thighs instantly creates a shorter stride, reduces your risk of running injuries, and increases your cadence efficiency.

For proper running form, imagine a string on your heel running directly through your body and out the crown of your head. If you were to pull the string straight up, your heel should lift beneath your butt. Achieving this takes some mindfulness and repetition. Try strengthening your hamstrings with at least two of the following exercises per week:

- Hamstring curls
- Deadlifts
- Glute bridges
- Hip thrusts

## 5. Hips and Waist

The height of your knees and thighs at the end of your drive phase is controlled by the hip flexor—the unsung hero of running. There's a misconception that the bulk of your power when running comes from your calves and quads, but such is not the case. Real power comes from the trifecta that is the hamstring, glute, and [hip flexor](#).

Your ability to flex your hips is what determines how fast and how far you can pick up your feet. Inability to drive power from the hips is a serious performance detriment and short-changes your stride. When you improve your hip drive, you'll notice a significant “pop” in your run—especially at high speeds.

With respect to your waist, Mom knows best. When she says to stand up straight, she means in your running position, too. Many runners—both beginners and seasoned vets—aim to perfect the “forward lean” that they heard was part of a proper running technique. As a result, they end up slouching, or leaning from the waist.

It's true that a forward lean is a plus, but the tilt should come from the ankles, not the hips. This ankle lean happens naturally without even trying, so if you want to learn how to run properly, avoid consciously tipping forward. Keep your waist tilted up, not down, instead; bending from the waist puts pressure on the hips, which is incorrect running form.

There are tons of weight-bearing and non-weight-bearing exercises you can do at home or the gym to strengthen your hip flexors, such as:

- Mountain climbers
- Lunges
- Straight leg raises

The goal is to activate full mobility in your legs, so stretching is just as important as strengthening for proper running form. Keeping your calves, quads, hamstring, glutes, and hips lithe and limber is also your best bet for preventing running injuries.

## **6. Glutes**

Weak glutes are a notorious problem for runners. Without buns of steel, the wrong muscles (like the quads) can take over and lead to low back pain or knee injuries as those areas try to overcompensate. Ideally, your glutes should stabilize the pelvis and minimize your risk of Achilles tendinitis and iliotibial band syndrome. As noted, they're also a major source of power in your stride.

You need to both strengthen and activate your glutes for proper running form. The first step is becoming aware of them by simply learning how to contract them when you're sitting, standing, walking, or running. Our gluteal muscles can develop a bit of amnesia due to sedentary lifestyles, so you need to remember how to get them fired up.

Once you include your glutes as second nature in your gait, strengthen them by performing exercises such as:

- Fire hydrants
- Donkey kicks
- Bridges
- Deadlifts
- Side lunges

## **7. Core**

You don't need a ripped six-pack for proper running form, but a strong core (chest, back, abs, obliques) can improve your running speed and posture. Your core strength allows the

hips and lower back to work together more smoothly, with less rocking and less energy expended. It also improves your balance, meaning quicker recovery and fewer missteps. In order to maintain a tall, erect posture, imagine there's a string attached to the crown of your head pulling it upward. You should also use core workouts such as:

- Planks
- Superman
- Crunches
- Twists

## **8. Arms and Hands**

Your arms are there to help you generate more energy—don't waste them. Swinging them sideways does nothing for you. Instead of swinging them across your body, keep them bent at a 90 degree angle and maintain that posture as you swing them back and forth. Your hands should also be relaxed, but don't let them turn floppy. They should be stable, but not clenched in a fist or hyperextended. If your hands are tight, you can experience tension all the way up your arms, through your shoulders and to your torso.

Your arms stem from your core, so having strength in these limbs strengthens your torso altogether. Keep these additional tips in mind for proper running form:

- Swing opposite arms and legs
- Swing from the shoulders, not elbows
- Have the hands pass the body at about hip height

## **9. Shoulders**

One of the most difficult elements of correct running form is a relaxed posture—which is critical for maintaining proper posture. Your shoulders should be relaxed, loose, and low, not high and tight. As you start to focus on how to run correctly, you might notice your shoulders creeping towards your ears as you run. Try to cut this habit out. They need to stay stable and not dip from side to side during your stride; otherwise, you'll negatively impact your center of gravity and momentum.

It might be difficult to stay relaxed, so refer back to these pointers if you struggle with shoulder tension:

- Raise your shoulders to your ears at every mile mark and drop them back down. The contraction and release should help remind you to keep them in their ideal, relaxed position.
- Check your hands—they can be causing the tension. Pretend like you're holding an egg that you don't want to crack.
- Tune up your core; it'll strengthen and elongate your torso.

## 10. Neck and Head

A forward head posture—also known as “texting neck”—can cause stress on runners and slow down your stride. Put simply, if your head moves forward, so does your neck, and so does your upper back. Your head is heavy, and where it’s positioned will dictate how hard your neck and back muscles will have to work to support it. For every one inch forward of the shoulders, the head gain tens pounds.

Your crown should be elongated and centered above your neck for proper running form. When you run, remember to look with eyes instead of dropping your head. Keep your gaze focused about 20 meters ahead of you and only glance down when necessary.

If weak neck muscles struggle to keep your head in proper alignment, try some exercises to keep your head on straight—literally:

- Supine neck curls
- Neck retractions
- Shoulder grip stretch

With these tips in mind, you’re well on your way to running success.

Mastering the proper running form and proper running technique isn’t difficult; follow these 10 steps and make some simple adjustments to feel an-all new efficiency in your stride that you have to experience to appreciate.