



Tips for running your first 5K

Even if you've been toeing starting lines for years, race days are always a bit nerve-wracking. After all those weeks of training, goal-setting, and perfecting everything from eating the right fuel to wearing the correct shoes for you, when show time arrives, the stakes are high—especially if it's your first time racing.

But while a few prerace jitters are perfectly normal (and the extra boost of adrenaline might help you perform better), there's no need to stress too much; after all, races are supposed to be as fun as they are challenging. The most important thing is to arrive on the starting line feeling calm, healthy, and ready to run your best. Here, we've gathered a few reminders to keep you on track in the critical days and hours before the starting gun fires, and to help you recover after you cross the finish line.

The Week Before the Race

Stop stressing. Runners tend to be a competitive bunch, and we sometimes get carried away with setting goals for how fast we want to run, where we want to place, and who we want to beat in the race. But it's important to remember that 5Ks and 10Ks are hugely positive community events. You get to spend a morning challenging yourself with strangers cheering you on. If you're afraid you'll finish last (we've all thought it), remember that a wide range of people with varying levels of fitness race, and many people just go to walk them from start to finish.

"I've found that if a goal or the path to a dream are within reach, the motivation should be really strong," two-time Olympian Molly Huddle wrote in a *Runner's World* column about goal-setting. "Real possibility is palpable and

creates that recognizable frisson of excitement mixed with slight fear. You will know it!”

Know the course. If you can, run the race course (or drive or bike it) so you can get familiar with where you’ll need to push and where you can cruise; if you’re traveling to the race and don’t have time to scope it out beforehand, you can study the course map online. Make sure to locate the race start early to eliminate the risk of getting lost on race morning.

Eat what you’re familiar with. The week before racing isn’t the best time to try new cuisines and fueling strategies. Instead, eat whatever has worked best for you (read: hasn’t upset your stomach) during your regular weekday runs.

If you’re traveling to a race and have to eat out a day or two before the event, try to find simple, easily digestible dishes that aren’t likely to cause any GI issues. For example, you might opt for a rice bowl with chicken and veggies over sushi.

Get ready the night before. Lay out your gear and get as much sleep as possible—aim for eight hours.

The Days Before the Race

Don’t do anything new. Race week isn’t the time to try new shoes, new food or drinks, new gear, or anything else you haven’t used on several workouts. Stick with the routine that works for you.

Get off your feet. In the days before you race, try to stay off your feet as much as possible. Relax, and leave the lawn work or shopping or sightseeing for after the race.

Graze, don’t chow down. Rather than gorging on pasta the night before the race, which could upset your stomach, focus on eating well-balanced meals throughout the day before the race.

For race distances of 10K or shorter, it’s not necessary to carb load, according to Pamela Nisevich Bede, R.D., sports dietitian and coauthor of *Run to Lose*. “It’s unlikely you’ll deplete the fuel in your muscles in the time it takes to

complete those distances,” Nisevich told *Runner’s World*. So you can skip the gigantic bowl of fettuccine alfredo à la Micheal Scott from *The Office* and opt instead for the regular meals and snacks that have fueled your training.

Put your hands on your bib. The night before the race, lay out your clothes, and if you have your bib, fasten it on. That’s the one thing (other than your shoes, of course) you need at the starting line. Don’t show up without it! Get as much sleep as possible—aim for eight hours.

Race Day

Limit your sipping. Yes, you need to stay hydrated, but don’t guzzle anything 30 minutes before the gun; sip if your mouth is dry or it’s particularly hot out. Some athletes will take a mouthful and use it as a rinse and spit. Your best bet is to stay hydrated throughout the days leading up to the race, and if you’re racing in the morning, top off your fluids as needed once you wake up. If it’s a night race, drink regularly (but not excessively) throughout the day.

Fuel smart. Don’t eat anything heavy within two hours of the race. While different meals work for different runners, as a general rule of thumb, your meal should contain mostly carbs, a little protein, and a limited amount of fiber and fat. Here are a few tried-and-true prerace meals: a toasted bagel with peanut butter and a banana; an energy bar with a cup of fruit; or oatmeal topped with berries and a handful of nuts.

For some more meal inspiration, check out professional 5K runner Justyn Knight’s overnight oats recipe, which he eats before every morning workout: The night before, he fills a jar with oats and almond milk; then the next morning, stirs in peanut butter, sugar, chia seeds, and fruit such as raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, or banana slices.

Arrive early. First, triple-check what time your race starts—large races often start in waves, and race directors usually ask participants to stand in their specified corrals long before the starting gun goes off. Plan to get to the race well before the start so you’ll have time to pick up your number (if you don’t already have it), use the bathroom, and warm up. You don’t want to be running to the starting line.

Identify yourself. Put your name, address, cell phone number, bib number, and e-mail address clearly on your race bib, or better yet, use a RoadID, which you can wear on your wrist or shoe.

Bring extra tissue. The only thing worse than waiting in a long porta potty line is getting to the front and realizing that there's nothing to wipe with.

Don't overdress. It will probably be cool at the start, but don't wear more clothing than you need. Dress for 20 degrees warmer than it is outside. To stay warm at the start, you may want to bring (expendable) clothes that you can throw off after you warm up. Also, pack a trash bag—it'll shield you if it's raining at the start, and can double as a seat so you can plop down on the wet grass.

Set at least two goals. Going into the race with a goal in mind can be a huge motivator to perform to your potential. While aiming for the sky is commendable, it's also important to stay realistic.

That's why you should set two goals: one goal for a perfect race, and another as a backup in case it's hot, windy, or it's just not your day. Huddle calls these backups "triage" goals, or goals that are put in place when the race goes south. If you find that the weather isn't cooperating, focus on different goals, like holding a given pace or not letting anyone pass you.

And it's best to set a third goal that has nothing to do with your time. This performance goal could be something like finishing, running up the hills rather than walking them, or fueling properly and successfully avoiding GI distress.

Fix it sooner, rather than later. If your shoelace is coming loose, or you start to chafe early in the race, take care of it before it becomes a real problem later in the race.

Start slow, and stay even. Run the first 10 percent of the race slower than you normally would, with the idea that you'll finish strong. Don't try to "bank" time by going out faster than your goal pace. If you do that, you risk burning out early. Try to keep an even pace throughout the race, and save your extra energy for the final stretch to the finish.

After the Race

Keep moving. Get your medal and keep walking for at least 10 minutes to fend off stiffness and gradually bring your heart rate back to its resting state. Be sure to do some postrace recovery stretches to stretch out your legs, back, and hips.

Refuel. There are usually snacks at the finish line, but what the race provides may not sit well with you (especially if it's, say, barbecue sandwiches, as one *Runner's World* editor ate at a postrace party and paid the price for later). To recover quickly, pack a snack—or ask your cheer squad to have one waiting for you—with a combination of protein and carbs to rebuild muscles and restock your energy stores, like a Clif bar. Consume it within a half hour of finishing the race.

Get warm. Change into fresh, dry clothes as soon as possible. After you cross the finish line, your core temperature will start to drop fast, and keeping sweaty clothes on will make you cold and also tighten up your muscles, possibly leading to more soreness later.

Shake out the next day. As sore as you might feel the day after the race, it's important to move the next day, as doing so will increase circulation to your muscles and help you bounce back sooner. If a slow jog is too much, try a non-impact activity such as swimming, cycling, or working out on the elliptical. Just keep the effort level *easy*.

Runner's World

<https://www.runnersworld.com/beginner/a20796964/tips-for-your-first-race/>