



Most injuries are preventable

# RUNNING INJURIES

WITH PHIL MACK

Stay injury free with this advice from the former international triathlete and fitness coach to the South African Springboks and the Ulster and Leicester Tigers rugby teams

Words **GEORGE WINTER**



**R**unning is a great way to stay fit and healthy, but at some point most runners will get injured. So can we avoid having to see a physio? Who better to ask than Phil Mack, a consultant sports physiotherapist ([thephysiotherapyclinics.com](http://thephysiotherapyclinics.com))? Phil has a great reputation for the diagnosis and treatment of sports injuries and the rehabilitation of athletes back to full fitness. As a former international triathlete and strength and conditioning coach to the South African Springboks and the Ulster and Leicester Tigers rugby teams, Mack combines learning with hands-on experience.

## MOST INJURIES ARE AVOIDABLE

So-called overuse running injuries are what we see most often in our clinics,' says Phil. "But with a good understanding of injury avoidance, plus an appropriate training strategy, most of these injuries are preventable."

## CORRECT RUNNING SHOES

Shoes, says Phil, are key to avoiding injuries: "But with so much choice available many runners use the wrong shoe for their foot type, and this is often the main cause of injury," he says. "Running shoes should keep your feet in their natural position and protect them from injury. But they shouldn't alter your natural running mechanics, thus producing muscle or joint imbalances or asymmetries that can lead to injury." Phil suggests going to a specialist running shop, where trained staff can make a proper assessment; once you've found your ideal running shoes, buy a second pair halfway through the life of the first pair and wear them in; and never race in new shoes.

## RUNNING STYLE

There's a lot of debate about the best type of running style to adopt: to heel strike or to reduce your stride length and land more with the midfoot or even forefoot. Phil says: "The main benefit of a smaller stride length is

## MORE TOP TIPS FROM PHIL MACK

- 1 Varying exercise reduces running-injury risk: runners who only run are at greater risk of overuse injury than those who mix it with other activities such as cycling and circuit training.
- 2 Minimising running on roads and pavements helps reduce injury risk: go on trails and tracks.
- 3 Invest time in quality recovery: runners are bad at recovering effectively. Active recovery is best for recovering from tough sessions. Try light spinning on a bike, or aqua-jogging. If pushed for time try foam rolling to prepare the main muscle groups before stretching; active stretching such as leg swings and lunges help remove lactic acid residue; 10-15 mins immersed in a cold-water bath up to your hips; recovery tights; and massage.



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## “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. If you have the right shoes, a good style and training plan, stick to them”

to help minimise ground reaction forces and reduce stress to joints, especially the hip and knee; factors associated with a greater risk of running-related injuries like runner’s knee, ilio-tibial band (ITB) syndrome and shin splints.

“Our sports physiotherapists have guided many runners with knee pain, for example, back to full, pain-free running fitness by reducing their stride length. However, reducing stride length doesn’t work for everybody and can cause its own set of injuries.”

If you’re undecided, Phil advises to only think about changing if your current style is causing problems. If you’re currently injury-free, don’t rush into changing your style and risk what’s already working.

Training is about steady progression. I asked Phil how fast we should build up mileage. “For a novice or heavier runner, I’d suggest a 3-5% weekly increase,” he suggests. He also says that even a seasoned runner changing from steady-state running to hill repeats will need to make this change using careful progressions of both speed and volume: “Intervals,” says Phil, “produce different running mechanics and ground reaction forces, and the runner needs time to adapt. At our clinics, we often

see fit ‘non-running’ athletes like cyclists, who take up running, or use running as part of their training, only to develop an overuse injury through increasing their mileage too quickly.”

### STRENGTH TRAINING FOR RUNNING REDUCES INJURY RISK

“If running is your main sport, then focus on developing the key muscle groups which need to be strong to maintain correct mechanics and posture whilst running,” says Phil. “The

key muscles to benefit from additional strength training are the glutes, VMO (part of the quadriceps), core and other postural muscles. One of the best functional exercises that engages all these muscles together is overhead lunges (if performed correctly).”

### FINALLY

“Listen to your body,” advises Phil. “Sometimes at the start of a training session I’m there mentally, but my legs are sore and stiff. I know I haven’t recovered sufficiently from a previous session, so rather than keep running and risk injury, I’ll swim, aqua-jog, cycle, or even have a day off. And most important: if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. If you’ve got the right shoes, a good running style and progressive training plan, stick to them.”



## ‘JANE’: A PHIL MACK CASE STUDY

**PROBLEM:** Jane, a runner for over 12 years, presented with severe Achilles tendinitis in both legs, a few weeks after running her 6th marathon. She’d never experienced this injury before.

**CAUSE:** We ask runners to bring all their running shoes to the clinic. Jane was aiming for a sub 3 hour marathon, and had been wrongly advised to go from a moderate, anti-

pronating supportive shoe to a lightweight, neutral racing shoe with less stability and reduced support. She changed two weeks before the race.

**TREATMENT:** We treated the Achilles tendinitis with physiotherapy, taping and a progressively reducing heel wedge. This was combined with aqua-jogging and eccentric calf exercises until she was able to walk pain-free. Then she

was introduced to the cross-trainer, a great rehab transition back to running. Jane was encouraged to return to her original supportive shoes and given a progressive ‘return to running’ programme at around 5% increase in mileage/week.

**OUTCOME:** Jane’s back to full, pain-free training and recently completed a marathon – in her original running shoes.