

Tips for First Time Marathoners

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I'm preparing to run my 17th marathon this fall and also helping a number of my running clients prepare for their first marathon. After all the training, I've got plenty of tips on how to survive and thrive in your very first marathon. And for those of you who have been putting in lots of marathon training—congratulations on making it this far!

I ran my first marathon at 21 years old (just 10 years ago) and I recall having to teach myself how to train, how to eat, and how to survive race day. It was a great experience; so much so that I have run 15 more marathons since and now will be running the New York marathon in November. However, I did not know a fraction of the race day tips that I know now after having experienced so many other races. For my first marathon I was in top shape and filled with determination, but I was not aware of how hard the 26.2 miles I had ahead of me would be.

It's my hope that by sharing my expertise I can save you a lot of stress, time, and pain and help make sure your first marathon isn't your last.

14 Ways to Make Your First Marathon a Success

1) Dress like a winner. Make sure that your shirt, shorts, socks, and bra is wick free and not 100% cotton to avoid or minimize chafing. Consider lubricants for chafing and blister powder

for your feet as well. Make sure to wear this gear and lubricants in your training runs to see what works and does not so there will be no surprises (at least with gear) on race day.

2) Don't try any new race day nutrition on your race day or the day before. You will get all kinds of free samples at the race expo the day prior to the race. You can accept them all but don't use them on race day. Stick with the same gels, bars, and gummies that you've used throughout your training. I find that even by switching flavors of GU my stomach would turn so I always stick with Chocolate Outrage gel for my 2 gels on race day.

4) Get yourself a new pair of kicks. A good, supportive running shoe can last 300-400 miles, but they lose 50% of their cushioning much sooner than that. Get some new ones and break them in during your last 2 weeks of training. Make sure to run 1 long run in these shoes to make sure they work for race day. And if you have not done so yet, I recommend going to a small specialty running store and getting fit for the proper shoes for your arch and the kind of runner you are (underpronator, overpronator, neutral).

5) Carb load for 2 days prior to the race. You want to maximize the amount of glycogen stored in your muscles because poorly fueled muscles are associated with needless fatigue. The more glycogen you have the better your endurance will be. The glycogen stays in your muscles until you exercise, and since this is taper time it is likely you will be running very little (1-2 miles) or not at all in the 2 days prior. Have a big meal at lunch the day before the race, but take it easy with dinner. This gives your body time to assimilate the nutrients, and having a huge meal so close to the race is risky if you're at all worried about intestinal issues.

6) Relax the day before the race. Try to relax your body and mind. This means you should be spending the majority of the day resting. This will give your body a chance to relax before the big day and hold those glycogen stores for race day. This is always hard for me because I am always on the go, but I've learned that relaxing the day before pays off!

7) Get as much sleep as you can the night before your race. But if you do not get a good night's sleep don't stress. Your nerves and fears make give you a sleepless night the day prior (even some race day dreams), but don't stress, this is perfectly normal. Ultimately, the amount of sleep you get before a race has little to do with how you'll perform. As long as you've been sleeping well during the previous week, your body will have plenty of energy to draw from.

😄Bring throwaway clothes. Usually marathons are very early and the temperature at the start of your race may be cooler. Once you start your race your body temperature will rise considerably, so it is smart to dress in layers. I prefer to wear shorts and a sports bra with a sweatshirt and sweatpants layered over. A few minutes prior to the race I take off the sweatshirt and pants. After the first mile your body will warm up. Many races have charity bins where you can toss extra clothing, which is then donated to a charity, so feel no guilt in tossing your clothes.

9) Arrive for your race early. There is always traffic at every marathon, so arrive early. This will also give you time to visit the restroom and stretch.

10) Don't have a time goal. If you're like me, this is almost impossible. But if you can, don't make your goal for your first marathon any more than just to finish the race and have fun! You can make a time goal for your next marathon.

11) Pace yourself. Make sure you don't let your adrenaline get the best of you. Studies show that every 10 seconds (per mile) you run too fast that you run the half of the marathon, you'll lose 20-25 seconds per mile in the second half of the race.

12) Hydrate properly. Life is about balance, and too much or too little of anything is bad. This is especially true when it comes to marathon hydration. Watch out for hyponatremia. Everyone knows about the dangers of dehydration, but over hydration is a concern too. Hyponatremia occurs when you drink so much water that you dilute the sodium levels in your blood. This can be very dangerous and even life-threatening. Symptoms are very similar to those of dehydration; part of the reason it's so dangerous. To avoid hyponatremia, be sure to take in adequate sodium with your fluids, in the form of sports drinks, gels, or even salt tablets.

13) Make plans to rest right after the race. After every marathon I walk very slowly back to the car and I can feel all 26.2 miles in every muscle. Since this is a family outing with my husband and daughters we usually go to a casual dinner, and then we head home where I plan to rest for the day. I could find the energy to go out post race, but it wouldn't be smart. Your body needs res—after all, you just ran 26.2 miles and will have torn muscle fiber and lactic acid acclimation. Take it from me, a professional, and rest post race. And on a side note: your appetite may be diminished after the race, but it'll come back in the next 2-3 days and you will be very hungry!

14) Have a great time! Marathons are a lot of work with training and preparation, so enjoy your big day! Most of the race I am smiling with accomplishment and thankful for my health. But as a forewarning: no matter how well you train the last few miles will hurt and you will have to use your mental strength to get through the physical pain. It is well worth it. I have finished marathons with tears of joy because of the sense of accomplishment I've felt. Nothing comes close to the feeling of elation you have when you cross the finish line at 26.2 miles! Congratulations in advance for running a marathon and have a great race! Remember that you have the strength within you to run 26.2!