

## **Cross Training for the Running Athlete**

The most popular cross-training modes are cycling, swimming, elliptical exercise, and stepping. All are low- or nonimpact exercises that provide excellent aerobic workouts. That makes all of these valuable training options for runners. The elliptical trainer and the stepper in particular are good substitutes for running when running isn't possible—when you're injured, for example. But apart from reducing the volume of impact, working on these machines won't add anything to your running that running itself doesn't provide. The only way to become a better runner is to run, but the more running replaces other exercises in your fitness program, the more likely you are to become injured, suffer from burnout, or develop muscular imbalances. So what's a runner to do (besides run, of course)? Cross train.

Cross-training, or taking part in alternative forms of exercises should be part of every fitness plan because it helps reduce the risk of overuse injuries, improves muscular balance, targets your muscles in new and different ways, and aids in muscle recovery. In addition, cross-training can also prevent burnout and add a little fun and variety to your workout routine, while still helping you stay aerobically fit.

In addition to helping to prevent injury, cross training may be a very beneficial as part of your rehab process to work thru an injury and keep your fitness. There is nothing worse than losing several months of training just because you have to stop running. Many running type injuries can often be utilized as alternative form of exercise to maintain your training and fitness while you heal and return to running.

In this article, we'll outline two approaches to cross-training for runners:

- Activities that complement running
- Activities that enhance running.

Depending on your training and health situation, you can select the activities that will work best for you. Try to include some form of cross-training at least one to three times per week for optimal results.

Complementary cross-training activities use your main running muscles in different ways, and engage additional muscles that you may never use while running. Performing these types of activities will allow you to build greater muscle strength and muscular balance, therefore reducing your risk for injury.

### **Swimming**

Because swimming is a non-weight bearing activity, it gives the joints and connective tissues a break from the impact of running while allowing you to maintain aerobic fitness. Swimming can be a beneficial cross-training activity all runners, especially those recovering from injury. By targeting all the major muscle groups (quadriceps, hamstrings, glutes, abs, lower back and upper body), swimming allows your legs a break while developing the upper body musculature that is often neglected in runners. Additionally swimming may add significant benefit toward breathing patterns and overall aerobic capacity.

### **Cycling**

Cycling indoors on a stationary bike or in a Spinning Class at the gym on the road or trail is another low-impact activity that can give your body a break from the high impact of running. Biking targets the quadriceps and shin muscles, which are slower to develop in runners and helps strengthen the connective tissue of the knees, hips and ankles, which may reduce your risk for injury. Cycling primarily works the quadriceps, a big muscle group that running doesn't effectively work. Insufficient strength in the quads can allow the knees to buckle on landing during the foot-plant phase. This is the primary cause for the up-and-down bobbing motion seen in some runners, which can lead to patella tendinitis and other knee problems. Cycling can help with that. However, it should be noted that some running experts advise against cycling on non-run days because it can still be strenuous and exhausting to your muscles. So what do you do? If you want to cross train with biking, include it on your running days by running first and then cycling later in the day.

### **Elliptical**

The elliptical trainer is again another reduced weight bearing activity that takes away from the heavy pounding of running. Some caution should be used in pushing thru excessive resistance but this will allow you to continue with training the lower extremity muscles that are similar to running. There is also benefit from upper body training and core strength work from engaging the upper arms



## **Benefits of Cross-Training for Runners**

Cross-training is any sport or exercise that supplements your main sport -- in this case, running. Whether you're a beginner runner or an experienced marathoner, you can benefit from cross-training. Here are several reasons why runners should cross-train:

**It helps balance your muscle groups.** Cross-training helps strengthen your non-running muscles and rests your running muscles. You can focus on specific muscles, such as your inner thighs, that don't get worked as much while running and may be weaker than your running muscles.

**You'll maintain or even improve your cardiovascular fitness.** Many cross-training activities are great cardiovascular workouts, so they build on those similar benefits of running.

**It reduces your chance of injury.** By balancing your weaker muscles with your stronger ones, you'll help reduce your chance of injury. Participating in low-impact cross training activities, such as swimming or water running, will also lessen the stress on your joints, which are often a sore spot for runners.

**You'll avoid getting bored with running.** Running day after day will eventually burn out even the most hard-core running enthusiast. Cross-training gives runners a much-needed mental break from their sport, which is especially important for those training for long-distance events such as marathons.

**You can continue to train with certain injuries, while giving them proper time to heal.** Runners suffering from injuries are sometimes told by their doctor to take a break from running during their injury recovery. But, with certain injuries, it is possible to continue with cross-training. Cross-training can help injured runners maintain their fitness and deal better with the frustration and disappointment of being sidelined from running.