



Running Form 101:

Proper running form can prevent injury and promote efficiency. In other words, the better your running mechanics, the easier running feels and the less likely you are to get hurt while training. While everyone's physical make-up and individual situations are different, there are some across the board areas that all runners of all abilities can assess to ensure proper running form.

EYES AND HEAD: What is your head position and where are your eyes looking? A gaze that is focused directly in front of you helps to keep your neck in correct alignment with your spine. Often times, as runners fatigue, their chin will tip up or down. Keep your gaze forward, chin in a neutral position and ears in line with your shoulders.

POSTURE: You've probably seen a runner who needs a posture check. They may be leaning to one side or running with their shoulders "hunched". It's important to have a long, tall spine while running. Your rib cage should be aligned with your hips and shoulders should be pulled back and down. Hunched or shrugged shoulders cause tightness and fatigue which will cost your body valuable energy in addition to affecting speed and endurance. Proper torso alignment is also crucial for effective breathing, which we all know is critical for running! Your lungs need space to properly expand to maximize oxygen uptake. Limiting that space will definitely limit performance.

ARM/HAND CARRY AND SWING: The way that we move our arms and carry our hands can have a huge impact on how fast or slow we go. In addition, differences per side can indicate a strength imbalance or weakness that is being compensated for. Your arms should be held around a 90-degree angle, with elbows staying close to your sides. It is common to see runners with their elbows pointing outwards and their arms swinging across the front of their bodies. This can greatly impact momentum. Arms need to be moving in a linear front to back pumping motion to maximize the benefit of their movement. Hands may seem like a small, silly thing to focus on, but often tension in the hands leads to tension all the way up the arms and into the shoulders and neck. This is a terrible waste of energy. Hand should stay relaxed. One visual that is effective for me is to pretend I'm carrying a small baby bird in each hand.

HIPS: Shakira says the hips don't lie! Your hip base and gluteus maximus function are vital for power production in your running stride. While running, you should have a slight lean into the run. This lean should originate at the hips, NOT from rolling your shoulders forward. The forward lean at the hips actually aids in the proper recruitment of the glute muscles which provide much of the force that propels a runner forward.

Another common hip occurrence in runners is a drop in one hip. This is typically a biomechanical weakness in the hip of the weight bearing leg that causes the opposite hip to drop. There are many running drills and specific strength moves that can help to correct this. Hip strengthening should be a priority for any runner with this issue as it can cause a multitude of injuries if left untreated.

FOOT STRIKE: Your foot strike can have a significant effect on speed, efficiency and risk of injury. There are three main foot strikes in running: heel strike, forefoot strike and mid foot strike.

There isn't really an incorrect foot strike. All runners have different body types and individual issues. In fact, most runners use all three foot strike patterns depending on terrain, speed and duration of the run. Most athletic "experts" do concur that a mid foot strike reduces strain on lower leg muscles but again, without even thinking about it, runners typically adjust their foot strike based on what is in front of them.

STRIDE RATE: Whether you are concerned about speed or not, it is wise to be aware of your stride rate (cadence) and length. A longer stride with a lower running cadence often causes a runner to extend the leg out in front of the body as the foot strikes the ground. This can cause a "breaking" effect that not only slows you down, but increases the risk of injury.

Elite runners typically aim for a stride rate of 180 steps per minute (SPM). For us mere mortals, anything 165 or above is thought to reduce the risk of injury. Here's how to calculate your stride rate: After an easy warm-up, run at a normal cadence and count every step on the right foot for one minute. Multiply this number by two and you have your stride rate.

One easy way to improve your stride rate is to use a metronome. There are several different options to download, so you don't have to run around town looking silly carrying the tool you used for piano lessons in elementary school! Just be aware that increasing your stride rate will take time and patience. Practice running to the faster rhythm (begin with a goal of about 5 SPM fast than your current cadence) just a few minutes at a time to start with, gradually adding time as your body adjusts.

You don't need a professional to analyze your run form. Grab an observant friend who can make notes about the different physical aspects listed in this post. Chances are that you will have one or more areas that you can work on. This is free speed, friends! A quick adjustment to one aspect can completely change how you feel when running. As always, if you have specific questions or concerns, please reach out to me.

Happy Running!

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