Your 20-week beginner training guide

New to marathons and looking to take on the ultimate challenge? This guide has everything you need to know to get you prepared and ready for race day.

First and foremost, set your goals and make sure you have everything you need ahead of training.

1. Be prepared

As you may have not completed a marathon before, be sure to leave yourself at least 5 months for training. This will give you plenty of time to achieve your goals, build up your distance and be ready for race day.

2. Record your training

Using an app or GPS tracker is a great way to track your progress and monitor your pace. Set yourself a realistic pace throughout your training to make you consistent.

3. Get your running kit sorted

You need to ensure you have the right kit that will last right through to race day. It's always a good idea to get your gait read by an expert and get some good quality running shoes that will support you. Remember, never wear new shoes on race day! If you're a regular runner, you need to change your running shoes every 300-500 miles.

4. Warm up and stretch before running

Develop a stretching regime before each run. Stretching running-specific muscles can prevent many injuries – e.g. calves, hamstrings, Achilles, quadriceps, adductors, abductors and back. Cool down, including a 5-10 min walk, after each run. If you do get and injury, ensure you consult a professional and pause your training immediately.

5. Training intensity

Marathon pace: This is the pace that you aim to run your marathon at. If your target marathon time is 5 hrs, then aim to complete every mile in 11m 45s. Amend this to suit your own marathon time.
Easy pace – long run: To improve endurance, oxygen intake and utilisation. Easy pace also conditions the body to use fat as an energy source, which is likely to reduce your weight. Easy pace is about 30-60 secs slower than your intended marathon pace.
Hill run: To enhance run-specific strength and running efficiency. Find a hill that takes about 3-5 mins to climb to the top, not too steep, 7-8% gradient. You should be breathing quite hard at the top. Jog or walk down hill to recover.

Your 20-week training plan

Warm up and cool down
All sessions should include a 5min warm up / cool down to help prevent injury

Week 1-4 *Base fitness - low intensity*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 1	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low Intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km medium Intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	10 mi / 16.5 km
Week 2	REST DAY	3 mi / 5k m low Intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km medium Intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	10 mi / 16.5 km
Week 3	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km medium Intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	6 mi / 9.7 km medium Intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	13 mi / 21.2 km
Week 4	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km medium Intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km medium Intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	11 mi / 18 km

Intensity levels
Low, medium, high (low intensity for longer runs, high intensity for intervals / speed)

Week 5-8 *Base fitness - low intensity*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 5	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	6 mi / 9.7 km med. intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	13 mi / 21.2 km
Week 6	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5km med. intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	8 mi / 13 km med. intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	15 mi / 24.5 km
Week 7 - recovery week (reduced)	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	10 mi / 16 km low intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	17 mi / 27.5 km
Week 8	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	8 mi / 13 km med. intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	15 mi / 24.5 km

Stretching
Make sure to give yourself 5mins after experience to stretch, this will help prevent injury.

Week 9-12 *Base level - increase aerobic*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 9	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	12 mi / 19 km low intensity	REST DAY	16 mi / 25.5 km
Week 10	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	10 mi / 16 km low intensity	3 mi / 5km low intensity	17 mi / 27.5 km
Week 11 recovery week (reduced)	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	7 mi / 11.5 km
Week 12	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	10 mi / 16 km low intensity	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	17 mi / 27.5 mi

Weight training and core stability
Giving time to work on weight and core training will really compliment your running training and help build muscle as well as help prevent injury. **Check out this article for some exercise ideas.**

Week 13-15 *Power - increase speed and interval training*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***MILE***
Week 13	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	11 mi / 17.7 km low Intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	18 mi / 29.2 km
Week 14	REST DAY	5 mi / 8 km med.-high intensity	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	12 mi / 19.3 km low Intensity	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	20 mi / 32.3 km
Week 15 recovery week (reduced)	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med.-high intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	7 mi / 11.5 km

Alternative sessions could include:

Cross training - using another form of aerobic experience to support your cardio training.
Swimming or cycling – a low-impact alternative to cardio.
HIIT class – a great alternative to high impact training.
Yoga/Pilates – great for a rest day stretch.

Be sure to reduce your weight training in your last couple of weeks.

Week 16 *Peak - longest run week*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 16	REST DAY	6 mi /10 km med.-high intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	REST DAY	18 mi / 29 km low intensity	24 mi / 39 km

Week 17-19 *Taper - reducing intensity before race day*								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 17	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	Weight training & core stability	12 mi / 19 km low intensity	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	19 mi / 30.5 km
Week 18	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	8 mi / 13 km low intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	15 mi / 24.5 km
Week 19	REST DAY	4 mi / 6.5 km med. intensity	REST DAY	REST DAY	8 mi / 13 km low intensity	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	15 mi / 24.5 km

Final week

Don't stop exercising completely otherwise your legs will feel sluggish and heavy for race day but keep it light.

Race week								
	Monday	***Tuesday***	***Wednesday***	***Thursday***	***Friday***	***Saturday***	***Sunday***	***TOTAL MILEAGE***
Week 20	REST DAY	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	REST DAY / stretch	3 mi / 5 km low intensity	REST DAY / stretch	20-minute light jog	RACE DAY!	32 mi / 52.2 km + light jog

Massage

If you decide to book in a massage before race day, try and schedule it at least 4 days out from race day, to give your legs time to recover.

A guide to good nutrition

Proper nutrition is a vital part of your training programme. As a runner your energy requirements can be really high – you will typically burn an extra 100 calories for every mile that you run in training or in a race. So, it's important to eat the correct food, at the correct time and that each component is balanced. These nutrition tips will ensure that you're fuelling your body correctly to get the most out of your training and be ready for race day!

Eat healthily

Try to eat at least 6 combined portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Supplements? Not essential, but you might consider taking extra vitamin C.

Eat carbohydrates and fat

When you run, the energy required comes from two main sources: Glycogen (stored in the muscles and other parts of the body) and fats (also stored in various parts of the body). Glycogen is produced from carbohydrates. You will use a small amount of carbs and a lot of fat when you run. There is a very limited supply of stored carbs and large stores of fats in the body. In order to utilise fats, you need a small amount of carbs to metabolise fat. If, during running, you use up ALL your carbs, your ability to use fats is severely affected, your energy source, therefore, dries up. This is usually referred to as 'hitting the wall'.

Store carbohydrates

Proper training conditions the body to use more fat, thereby sparing the carbs so that they will last for the whole 26.2 miles. As you improve, you start to use more fat and less carbs. Structured training, as above, will also condition the body to store more carbs.

Eat a balanced diet

A good diet should consist of about 50-60% carbs, 15% protein, 20-30% fat. The carbs should come from a mixture of complex (75%) slow energy release carbs (e.g. bread, potatoes, rice, pasta, cereal, etc) and simple (25%) quick energy release carbs (e.g. sugary drinks, jams, honey, chocolate, etc). It is better to have four or five small meals rather than three larger ones. The body can only store about 50-75g of carbs at a time. Two slices of bread weighing 60g contains about 27g of carbs. Try out different types of carbs during training runs and see which ones work best for you, but don't try anything new on race day or the evening before!

Time your meals

Have a carb rich meal 2-3 hrs before training or racing. This time can be very individual, so determine what is best for you by trial and error. Do NOT take any sugary drinks or food within 60 mins of running as this sets off an 'insulin reaction' which is likely to use more carbs than normal. After you have been running for 30 mins or more, this reaction is suppressed, and you can take in sugary food – e.g. a gel bar. Try this on a training run: drink about 50-100ml of water immediately before you start running. For many people, this helps with preventing de-hydration.

Drink plenty of water

To store 1g of carb the body requires about 4g of water, so drink plenty. Try to drink between meals, rather than during a meal to help with digestion.

Gel bars

Try using gel bars (only after 30 mins of running). They will supplement your energy stores during long runs and races. During shorter runs, let the body get used to using stored energy sources. Always remember to consume one before a water station so that you can wash it down with approximately 250ml of water – this is to ensure the gel dilutes to the correct consistency and can be absorbed quickly.

Replace nutrients

Have a carb rich meal about 30 mins after the end of a training run. This is the time when those hard-worked muscles are most receptive to nutrients. If you don't, it could affect your training the following day.

Snack attack

When you run regularly, as well as your generally higher calorie requirements, you will find that your metabolic engine (the speed at which you burn calories whether you are exercising or not) increases. To avoid energy lows throughout the day, make sure you keep a selection of healthy snacks to hand so you can keep your energy levels topped up.
By avoiding energy lows resulting from low blood sugar, you will have more energy for everyday activities and will keep your muscles and liver primed for your next training session.

No alcohol

If you get this wrong, you are likely to spoil your big day. Two days before the marathon, start taking in some extra carbohydrate and plenty of fluid. Stay off the alcohol and try to eat five to six small meals a day.

Marathon day

Make sure you have the famous carb-load meal the day before race day and if you are too nervous to eat on the morning of your marathon, try to at least have a usual breakfast, even if this is just a couple of slices of toast. Your body will have approx. 2000 calories worth of energy to use on an empty stomach, so as long as you eat at least something, it will give you a head start. Be sure to drink sufficient fluid and don't eat any sugary food within 60 mins of the start. If you have tried your gel bar intake during long training runs start taking them after you have run a minimum of 30 mins. If you haven't tried carb gels or drinks, do not try these on marathon day, they might make you unwell, instead, just ensure you are sipping water to stay hydrated.

This guide should have given you all the information you need to plan and ensure you achieve your goals. If you have any other questions whatsoever, please don't hesitate to get in touch via info@supportgstt.org.uk or info@supportevelina.org.uk – we're happy to help with any advice or tips you need!

Best of luck, we know you'll smash it!