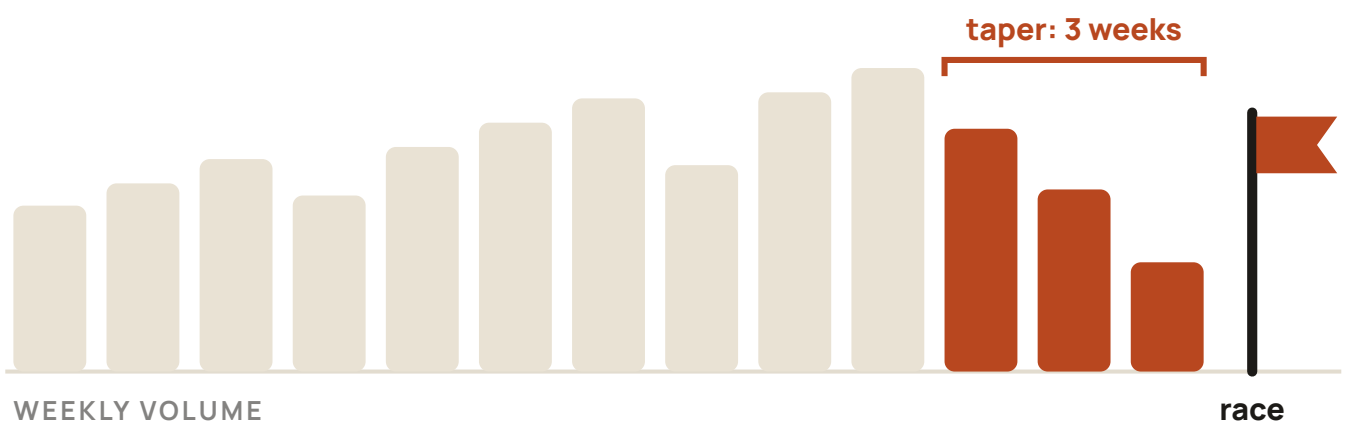


Race taper guide

2026

How to train the last 3 weeks, and what to eat, drink and do on race day
5K, 10K, half marathon, marathon



Your fitness is built. Now just don't lose it.

By race day your fitness is already built. You can't add much in the last few weeks, but it's easy to lose: extra fatigue, a new gel, a first kilometer that's way too fast.

This is a short version of everything I tell my own athletes before a race: how much to run, what to eat and drink, how to sleep and how to run the race itself.

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1 Why run less

Every workout gives you both fitness and fatigue. Fatigue fades faster than fitness. So when you run less, the fatigue goes away and the fitness stays.

The fitness is there. Let it show. **The main rule of the last weeks: don't try to make up volume.**

2 Taper by distance

The longer the race, the earlier you start running less. These are guidelines for people who run 3-6 times a week. The more you run and the longer you've been training, the closer you are to the upper end.

DISTANCE	HOW LONG	VOLUME	WHAT TO KEEP	LAST LONG RUN	LAST HARD SESSION
5K	5-7 days	a quarter less	short reps at 5K pace, strides	7-10 days out, normal length	3-4 days out, short
10K	7-10 days	a third less	reps at 10K pace, strides	8-10 days out, a bit shorter	4-5 days out, short
Half marathon	10-14 days	half by race week	reps at half marathon pace	10-14 days out, 15-18 km	4-5 days out
Marathon	3 weeks	half by race week	reps at marathon pace, strides	3 weeks out, your longest	4-5 days out

Marathon: 3 weeks, week by week

The same plan as in my "Run less" reel. Count volume from your biggest training week.

WEEK	VOLUME	LONG RUN	FAST WORK
3 weeks out	about $\frac{3}{4}$	last long one: 26-32 km, but no longer than 3 hours	one marathon pace session, as usual
2 weeks out	about $\frac{2}{3}$	18-22 km easy, last 5 km can be at marathon pace	marathon pace reps, a third shorter
Race week	under half, not counting the race	none	4-5 days out: 2-3 km at marathon pace and strides

For a half marathon it's all the same, just over 2 weeks: two weeks out you run about $\frac{3}{4}$ of your usual volume, and in race week about half.

3 Race week, day by day

The race is on Sunday. If it's on Saturday, move everything one day earlier. Easy running means a pace where you can comfortably hold a conversation.

DAY	5K AND 10K	HALF MARATHON AND MARATHON
Mon	easy run 30-40 min or rest	rest or easy run 30 min
Tue	15 min easy, then 4-5 × 3 min at race pace with 1-2 min jog between, 10 min cool-down	easy run 40 min and 4 strides of 20 s
Wed	easy run 30 min or rest	15 min easy, 2-3 km at race pace (or 3 × 1 km), cool-down
Thu	15 min easy, 2-3 × 2 min at race pace, cool-down	easy run 30-40 min
Fri	rest or a walk, joint mobility	rest or 20 min very easy
Sat	15-20 min easy and 3-4 strides of 15-20 s	15-20 min easy and 3 strides. Before a marathon, a walk is fine too
Sun	Race	Race

What not to do

- Long runs, hard intervals, anything “to the limit”.
- Weighted strength work. A light 10-15 minute routine is fine.
- New exercises, new shoes, new food.
- Deep tissue massage within 2-3 days of the race, if you're not used to it.

This is normal

- Heavy legs, sluggish runs. That's your body recovering, the fitness hasn't gone anywhere.
- You're up about a kilogram. That's carbs being stored along with water.
- Nerves and the urge to squeeze in more running. Don't give in: the work is done.

Running 3 times a week? Keep Tuesday (reps), Thursday (easy run and 2-3 × 2 min reps) and Saturday (15-20 min and strides). Rest or walk on the other days.

4

Sleep, routine, gear

Sleeping badly before a race is normal, it happens to almost everyone. What matters more is how you sleep all week. One rule: nothing new on race day. Everything you wear and eat should have been through a long run already.

Race week

- What matters most is sleeping well 2-3 nights before the race. That's your reserve.
- Go to bed at 22:30-23:00 and spend 8-9 hours in bed.
- Put your phone away an hour before bed.
- The day before the race, skip coffee after lunch.

The last few days

- Walk 20-30 minutes every day: fresher legs, calmer head.
- Racing in another city? Don't walk 15 km of sightseeing the day before. Save the tours for after the finish.
- Arrive 1-2 days early if you can. Pick up your race packet in advance.
- Rest more: books, movies, nothing new or tiring.

Clothes and shoes

- Shoes are broken in: 30-50 km on them, including at least one race pace session. But not worn out.
- Socks tested on a long run, no blisters.
- Clothes tested, no chafing seams. Vaseline wherever you tend to chafe.
- Pin your bib the night before. Check your timing chip.

Watch and fuel

- Watch charged. Don't install updates the night before.
- Race workout set up on your watch.
- Gels within reach: belt or pockets, as many as you need plus one spare.
- Headphones charged, if they're allowed in the race.

Weather

- Check the forecast 3 days out and the night before.
- Dress as if it's 10 degrees warmer: you'll heat up fast once you're running.
- Backup options: arm sleeves, cap, gloves, an old sweatshirt you don't mind tossing, a trash bag poncho.
- In the heat: light-colored clothes, a cap, water over your head at aid stations, a more modest goal.

5 Carb loading

Carbs stored in your muscles are the main fuel for running fast. In a marathon you can run low, so you top up the tank before the race. For a 5K or 10K, your normal diet is enough.

DISTANCE	LOADING	HOW
5K, 10K	not needed	eat as usual, the night before have your normal dinner with a decent serving of carbs
Half marathon	optional	if you'll run longer than 90 minutes: focus on carbs for the last 24-36 hours, about 8-10 g per kg of body weight per day
Marathon	needed	last 1.5-2 days: 10-12 g of carbs per kg of body weight per day

No need to starve or "deplete" yourself before loading. That's an outdated method. Just eat more carbs for a couple of days before the marathon, and you're training very little anyway.

FOOD	CARBS
100 g dry white pasta or rice	about 75 g
1 banana	about 25 g
1 slice of white bread	about 15 g
1 tbsp honey or jam	about 15 g
500 ml juice	about 50 g
500 ml sports drink	about 30 g
1 gel	usually 20-25 g

What to cut these days

- Cabbage, beans, peas, lots of raw veggies and bran: they cause bloating.
- Fatty, spicy or unfamiliar food, and alcohol.
- Dairy, if it sits heavy in your stomach.
- Don't cut out meat and fish completely, just eat less of them and more carbs on the side.
- When you can't eat any more, juice and sports drinks help.

6 Race morning

Your body uses up carb stores overnight, so you top them up in the morning. The closer to the start, the less you eat.

WHEN	HOW MUCH	EXAMPLE FOR 70 KG
3-4 hours before	a solid meal: about 2 g of carbs per kg (half marathon, marathon)	3 slices of white bread with jam, a banana, 300 ml juice, sweet tea
2-3 hours before	lighter: about 1 g per kg (5K, 10K)	2 slices of white bread with honey and a banana
15-20 min before	optional	a gel or a few sips of sports drink (before a half marathon or marathon)

Breakfast rules

- Eat what you've already tested before long runs. No experiments on race day.
- Go easy on fat, meat and vegetables: they sit in your stomach for a long time.
- Too nervous to eat? Drink juice or a sports drink and eat a little at a time.
- Drink a glass or two of water 3-4 hours before the start, then drink when thirsty.

Coffee and caffeine

- Drink coffee every morning? Have it on race day too, as usual, an hour before the start.
- If you want to be precise: about 3 mg of caffeine per kg of body weight, that's about 200 mg for 70 kg. Caffeine pills or gels are handier, the dose is on the label.
- More isn't better: too much brings shaky hands and an upset stomach.
- **Only if you've tested it in training.**

Dinner the night before. Your usual, with rice, pasta or potatoes, nothing fatty or spicy. Eat at least 3 hours before bed so you can fall asleep easily.

Early start. Don't want to get up 4 hours before? Eat a smaller breakfast 1.5-2 hours out and top up with juice, sports drink or a gel before the start. A solid dinner the night before helps too.

7 Fuel and water on course

The longer you run, the more it matters to eat along the way. The main rule: on race day, use only what you've already tested in training.

DISTANCE	TIME	CARBS PER HOUR	HOW
5K	under 30 min	not needed	breakfast is enough
10K	up to about an hour	not needed	a few sips of sports drink at an aid station, a gel is optional
Half marathon	1-2.5 h	30-60 g	1-3 gels with water. If you're faster than 1:30, sports drink is enough
Marathon	over 2.5 h	30-60 g, up to 90 g if your gut is trained	gels and sports drink on a schedule

Sample schedules

EXAMPLE	SCHEDULE	TOTAL
Half marathon in 2:00	a gel at minute 40 and 80, sips of sports drink at aid stations	about 30-40 g per hour
Marathon in 3:30	a gel every 25 min from minute 30: 7 gels, each with water	about 50 g per hour
Marathon in 4:00	a gel every 25 min from minute 30: 8 gels plus sports drink	about 55-60 g per hour

Want to take in more than 60 g an hour? Choose gels with glucose and fructose and train your gut to take food on the run: test everything on 3-4 long runs.

Small things. Wash a gel down with water, a few sips is enough. Don't take a gel and sports drink at the same time: too much sugar for your stomach. Find out in advance which gels and sports drink the aid stations have. If you prefer your own, bring your own. Keep gels within reach: a belt or shorts pockets, not a backpack.

Water and sodium

- Drink to thirst. It usually comes to 400-800 ml per hour: more in the heat, less in the cold.
- You don't have to drink at every aid station, a few sips when you feel like it is enough.
- Drinking too much is more dangerous than too little. Nausea, headache, swollen fingers: stop drinking water and go to the medical tent.
- Long race, heat, or a heavy sweater (white salt marks on your cap)? Add sodium: sports drink, salt tablets or salty gels, tested in advance.

8 Warm-up and pacing

The shorter the race, the faster you run from the first meters and the longer the warm-up. Before a marathon you barely need one: the first kilometers are the warm-up.

DISTANCE	EASY RUNNING	THEN	FINISH
5K	10-15 min	running drills 3-5 min, 3-4 strides of 15-20 s, 1-2 × 1 min at race pace	5-10 min before the start
10K	10-15 min	running drills, 3-4 strides of 15-20 s	10 min before
Half marathon	8-10 min	2-3 relaxed strides	10-15 min before
Marathon	5 min or walking	joint mobility, 2-3 easy strides if you like	15 min before, first 2-3 km easier

Don't cool down between the warm-up and the gun: wear an old sweatshirt or a poncho and toss it right before the start. In the cold, do a couple of short strides right in the corral.

Race pacing: don't start fast

The most common mistake: starting too fast. Adrenaline and the crowd pull you forward, and you pay for it in the second half.

Why a fast start hurts

- Fresh legs and the crowd fool you: a fast pace early on feels easy.
- The faster you run, the faster you burn fuel. Extra seconds at the start turn into minutes at the end.
- Most runners finish a marathon noticeably slower than they started.
- Running even and picking it up at the very end works best.

How to start

- **Marathon:** first 5 km 5-10 seconds per km slower than goal pace, then steady. Pick it up only after 30 km.
- **Half marathon:** first 3-5 km no faster than goal pace. Stick to the plan until 15 km, then decide.
- **10K:** first 2 km at goal pace, speed up after 7 km if you have it in you.
- **5K:** first km right at goal pace. The third km is usually the hardest, hang in there.

Among tall buildings and in tunnels, GPS watches often get it wrong. Go by the kilometer markers on the course.

Hot out? Adjust your goal. The hotter it is, the slower a long race gets.

Line up in your own start corral, not closer to the front. People will pass you, and that's fine: you'll get it back at the end.



Igor Potseluev, your running coach who's **always there**

Want a taper built around your race and your plan? Let's work it out together.

Get coached by me

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