



EXPERT TRAINING TIPS: A Four Part Series

Hit the ground, running or walking. A ground-up approach to maximizing your running and walking programs.

Part 1: The Foot and Ankle

Your feet and ankles will get plenty of time pounding the pavement while you are out and about exercising. Regardless of your activity, there are a few key pointers to keep in mind to help progress your performance while helping reduce the risk of injuries.

As your running or walking routine continues into Fall, remember that your feet and ankles are the contact point between the ground and your body and serve as agents of propulsion. What that means is that your feet and ankles have a very important duty; not only do they help your body begin the process of absorbing forces while you run or walk, they also are the last key ingredient for producing force that moves you forward as you run or walk. This means that building resiliency in your feet and ankles through strengthening and mobility exercises will help support a solid foundation. Remember, think of body resilience as the ability to maintain health and fitness throughout the duration of an exercise program. The more resilient your body is, the less often you will be injured. Strengthening and mobility exercises are key to helping build resilience in bones, joints, and muscles.

While the demands placed on your feet and ankles slightly differ between running and walking, they help your knees, hips, and core perform specific tasks to move you forward. In general, the main difference of your foot position between running and walking is which part of your foot contacts the ground first. When you are walking, your foot spends more time on the ground and actively helps push your body forward. Your heel strikes the ground, and as your body moves forward your foot becomes flat on the ground in the “midstance” phase and then transitions to having your toes push your body forward during the “propulsive” phase. Having good mobility in your ankles is helpful for being able to achieve a good gait during the different phases of ground contact at the foot during walking.

For runners, the foot will spend less time on the ground due to moving at a higher speed. In addition to spending less time on the ground, the main difference between running and walking is that your foot acts to help absorb forces from the middle of your foot as you run forward. Hitting the ground with your heel as you run will not only slow you down, but it can lead to an increased risk of injury.

Part 1: The Foot and Ankle (page two)

What does this all mean? For starters, giving proper attention to ankle mobility can help keep your feet and ankles healthy as you run or walk. Remember, mobility isn't just how freely your joints can move, it also means that you have good control over your body as you move through an entire range of motion. A thorough dynamic warm up before you run or walk can help improve ankle mobility. In addition to a thorough dynamic warm up before your run or walk, it is important to remember that resistance training is a key activity for helping build and maintain strength and resiliency in muscles, joints, and movements.

Another aspect for both runners and walkers to consider is the surface they are traveling on. Hard surfaces like asphalt or concrete can wear your body down over time. Consider walks or runs on softer surfaces like grass, forest trails, firm sand or dirt, or synthetic field turf a try to lessen the impact on your feet and ankles. Additionally, don't forget to give your running or walking shoes a good inspection as worn out shoes can also strain your feet and ankles. Depending on the type of your shoe, you might consider replacing your running or walking shoes every 4 to 6 months depending on how much you are training.

Remember, taking care of your feet and ankles helps lay the foundation for running or walking performance! Make sure to check out next month's article as we move up to the knee joint and discuss how it too plays a big role in your performance.

**Written by: Matt Hauck, MS, CSCS
Providence Sports Medicine, Sports Performance Specialist**

Author bio: Matt is a fitness and performance specialist, working with high school, collegiate, professional, and Olympic athletes in addition to fitness and wellness enthusiasts. He is a Sports Performance Specialist for Providence Sports Medicine.