

TO RACE OR NOT TO RACE?

PICKED UP A LAST-MINUTE INJURY? NOT DONE THE TRAINING YOU SHOULD OR THOUGHT YOU WOULD? **SARAH RUSSELL** LOOKS AT OVERCOMING LAST MINUTE PROBLEMS, AND DECIDING IF – AND WHEN – YOU SHOULD PULL THE PLUG ON YOUR MARATHON DREAM

The months of hard work are almost over and race day is looming. Your marathon is probably only a few weeks away now and with a bit of luck, you'll be feeling fit, healthy and ready to tackle the challenge. But what happens if you're not? What if training hasn't gone quite to plan? Even worse, what do you do if injury or illness strikes at the last minute? Should you still take part? Is it worth risking your health to hobble round, or should you play safe and stay at home.

Worrying statistics

More than 30% of runners who sign up for a marathon never make it to the start line. In the Virgin London Marathon, approximately 50,000 entries are accepted on the basis that only 35,000 runners will actually show up on the day. The organisers know this for a fact, as year after year, the pre-race drop out rate is the same. It's not surprising when you think about it though. Training for a marathon is tough and many runners underestimate the challenge ahead,

struggle with injury and are forced to withdraw well before the race.

Some runners, around 31% of the 'drop-outs', pull out knowing that they just haven't done the training and won't be ready. Others are forced to pull out at the last minute with injury (36%), illness (12%) or a family crisis. But if you've ever trained for a marathon and been forced to withdraw before race day, you'll know just how devastating it is, especially if you're one of the 70% raising money for charity. The worst scenario is coming down with a bug or virus just days beforehand. After months of training and sacrifice it is heartbreaking to make the decision not to run. Sometimes though it can be really difficult to make the right call and you have to listen to your body and head, not your heart.

If you suffer a serious injury which means you can't run, it's pretty obvious that you have to withdraw, but what if it's just a head-cold or a niggles? How do you know when it's time to pull the plug? Most runners would agree though, the decision to 'withdraw' from a marathon is an agonising process. Hopefully you

won't have to take it, but the advice in this feature should help you make that decision, plus some last minute fixes, which might just get you to the start (and finish) line in one piece.

Illness

AVOID IT:

In the weeks leading up to the marathon, make sure you do everything in your power to avoid picking up a bug or virus. Be fastidious in your hand washing and carry an alcohol hand gel around everywhere with you. Pack your diet full of antioxidant-rich fruit and vegetables and consider taking a vitamin supplement for a few weeks. Get plenty of sleep and avoid stress as much as possible to keep your immune system strong. If you feel yourself coming down with a cold or bug, back off the training and allow your body to fight it. Keep your diet bland in the final few weeks as well and avoid 'high risk' foods such as mussels, seafood or undercooked meat – the last thing you need now is a dose of food poisoning.



TRY THESE:

- **www.cherryactive.com**
A delicious cherry syrup packed with antioxidants to support your immune system.
- **www.elagen.com**
Used by professional athletes. A natural sports supplement to help your body recover and adapt to training
- **www.vicks.co.uk/first-defence/nasal-spray**
Lots of runners swear by Vicks First Defence. Use at the first sign of a cold.
- **www.berocca.co.uk**
An effervescent vitamin supplement to help support your immune function.

If illness strikes:

TO RUN a marathon when you're really unwell is foolish and you could be seriously risking your health. The marathon is grueling even if you're feeling 100%, so to run at anything less than that means you're unlikely to do yourself justice and could put yourself at risk. Running is obviously out of the question if you're seriously ill with a virus or bacterial infection, which makes you bedridden or requiring antibiotics. But if you've had a mild infection or are recovering from a recent illness, it can be more difficult to make the call and you should consult your GP for advice. The general rule of thumb however, is if you have a fever, vomiting, diarrhoea or a chesty cough, you shouldn't even attempt to start. Most big marathons have a deferral policy where you can transfer your entry to the following year, so while it's disappointing, it's the responsible thing to do for both yourself and the race organisers.

"Most medical emergencies during races occur in people who have been unwell but do not wish to miss the event," says the Runners' Medical Resource website. "It is unfair to yourself, your family, your sponsoring charity and the race support staff to risk serious illness and become a medical emergency."

If you just have a mild head cold, or just don't feel 100%, you could still try to run, but you need a different plan. You could aim to start and see how you feel, making a call at 10 miles for example, whether to continue or not. From the outset though, be realistic; be prepared to drop out if you don't feel well and reconsider your goal time. Depending on how you feel, just finishing might be the option, or you could aim for 30 seconds per mile slower and see how it goes.



If you're not feeling 100% then running a marathon is not a wise move

Injury

AVOID IT:

Adopt an intense injury prevention campaign for the 3-4 weeks before the big day. Do everything you can to avoid injury and try the following strategies to get you on the start line in the best possible shape.

TRY THESE:

Focus on stretching even more than usual – low back, hamstrings, calves, hip flexors and any other areas which feel tight.

Buy a foam roller or nodule ball and USE it every day. Concentrate on IT bands, calves, glutes and quads. Yes it hurts, but it's probably one of the most powerful things you can do to keep injury at bay. Buy one from www.strideuk.com

Book a sports massage once a week for the final month and perhaps a special 'top up' session a few days before.

Avoid running on uneven terrain where you risk twisting your ankle, and steer clear of dangerous activities like mountain biking, climbing or anything you're not used to. The last thing you need is to suffer a fall or have an accident.

Keep to your training schedule and don't try to cram in last minute panic sessions. Tapering properly is vital to avoid injury.

Keep your fluid intake up – dehydrated muscles are much more likely to get damaged.

Acupuncture is an alternative treatment gaining a huge following with runners. It claims to help reduce tightness in the muscles and could even prevent an injury occurring. A last minute treatment might be just the thing for a tight calf or problematic hamstring.



Washing your hands can help prevent the spread of germs

AS WE'VE often said in *Running fitness* before, just getting to the start line of a marathon can be as challenging as the race itself. And if you get there without any sort of injury at all, then you're in the minority.

"Trying to cram in last-minute panic training is also a big mistake," says Elle Phillips of StrideUK in Brighton. "People try to squeeze in too much last minute training and are more likely to injure themselves in the last few weeks. Tapering is really important over the final three weeks leading up to a marathon to allow your body to recover and get ready for the race. If an injury does occur however, then stop running, rest, apply ice and seek treatment from a soft tissue expert."

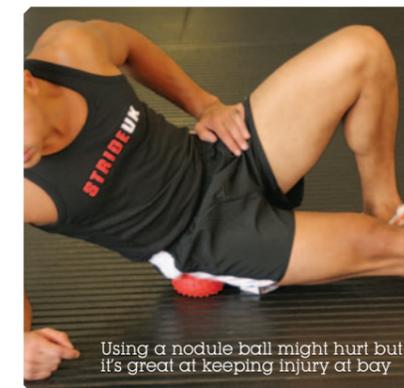
Hopefully you'll stand on the start injury free, but what if a niggle crops up in the weeks or days beforehand? "Depending on the type and severity of the injury," says physiotherapist Sally Jones from London, "you may still be able to run. But the first thing to do is get a proper diagnosis and treatment from a qualified physiotherapist or sports therapist - and then listen to every bit of advice!"

If you start your marathon with any inflammation or an existing injury, the chances are it'll be much worse by the end. But that's a risk only you can decide to take. Be prepared that if you do run with an injury, you could face a long lay off afterwards. It all depends on your reasons for taking part and how much the marathon means to you.

Even if you do have an injury or niggle crop up at the last minute, it doesn't mean your marathon dream is over. Get the right treatment as soon as possible, do everything the physiotherapist tells you and see how it responds. With combined treatments of massage, rest, ice and ultrasound you can reduce the severity of an injury – depending on what it is – by 60%, which might just be enough to get through the race in one piece. More drastic measures such as taping and taking anti-inflammatories are also options, but only do so under the advice of a doctor or physiotherapist.

Real experience

"Training for a marathon last year, I suffered a grade 2 calf tear about four weeks beforehand," explains five times marathon runner Scott Davis from Leicestershire. "Having had similar injuries in the past I knew the only treatment was rest. I made a pact that I wouldn't even try to run and immediately got on my bike to keep my fitness ticking over. I left it almost three weeks before trying to run so it was fully healed then tested it out. Amazingly it held up and I managed 3 runs before the marathon. My cycling had kept me fit though and I actually managed to run 3hrs 44mins, only three minutes away from my PB. Had I kept trying to run during the three week lay off, I would have never made it to the start."



Using a nodule ball might hurt but it's great at keeping injury at bay

Charity runners

IT IS devastating to have to pull out of the marathon, but it is much worse if you've raised a lot of money for a charity. The feelings of letting everyone down are overwhelming and it can be tempting to take part -even against doctors' orders.

As soon as you have any doubts the first thing to do is contact the charity that gave you the place. You can most likely defer your race entry to the following year or, when you've recovered, enter a different race later in the year to carry on with your fundraising efforts. None of your sponsors would expect you to run if you were ill or injured, and they are likely to be happy to make a donation anyway. Do be honest with them though and offer them the chance of a 'refund' if they have already donated online.

"We would never expect one of our charity runners to take part if they were ill or injured," says Robert Hall of the Cardiomyopathy Association. "My advice would be to communicate with your sponsors straight away and take guidance from your charity. Put a message on your fundraising website or page beforehand and let everyone know. They'll be more understanding if you communicate with them beforehand."



It can be devastating to pull out of a marathon, particularly if you're running for charity

Adjust your goal

IF YOU'VE lost training time to injury or illness, aren't feeling 100% or are carrying an injury at the start of the marathon, you'll probably have to adjust your target. If it's your first marathon, or you're raising money for charity, then just getting around – regardless of time – is a fantastic goal.

Too many runners focus on times and 'achievement' and get disappointed when they don't get the PB they wanted. There is a lot more to taking part in a marathon than just your final time. Running does not always have to be about 'achievement' and bettering your time, and sports psychologists reckon that runners are happier when they focus on 'process' rather than 'outcome' goals.

While it's a good idea to set yourself a goal, it's equally important to be able to adjust it when faced with a problem. Change your focus to 'enjoyment' of the event instead. Take in the sights, run with a (slower) friend, cheer along with the crowds and simply make your goal just to 'get round'. Take the pressure off and you might surprise yourself just how much you enjoy it!



FINAL WORD – WE UNDERSTAND HOW DEVASTATING IT IS TO PULL OUT OF A MARATHON AND WHAT AN AGONISING PROCESS IT CAN BE TO MAKE THE DECISION. IT TAKES MATURITY AND EXPERIENCE TO KNOW WHEN TO PULL THE PLUG ON A RACE, SO TRY TO LISTEN TO YOUR BODY AND KNOW WHEN SOMETHING IS SO WRONG IT'LL PREVENT YOU FROM RUNNING. TRY OUR LAST MINUTE ILLNESS AND INJURY PREVENTION PLANS AND HOPEFULLY YOU WON'T HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT, BUT IF YOU DO, YOU HAVE OUR SYMPATHIES. WE'VE BEEN THERE AND KNOW HOW MISERABLE IT IS. IN THE BIG SCHEME OF THINGS THOUGH, IT IS 'JUST A RACE' AND NO MATTER HOW UPSETTING IT IS TO PULL OUT, IT'S NOT WORTH THE RISK TO YOUR HEALTH. IF YOU'RE IN ANY DOUBT, THEN DO THE SMART THING AND DON'T RUN. **RF**