

Five Essential Winter Running Tips

By Sherry Ballou Hanson, Published Dec. 23, 2013

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A little planning can go a long way before heading outside in cold conditions.

If you love braving the elements and hearing the call of the wild, a little preparation can enable you to run strong through the winter. There may be a day here and there where you have to resort to the treadmill, elliptical trainer or another indoor cross-training option, but paying attention to the following five basic guidelines will enable you to keep these days to a minimum.

1. Layer for success.

“Layering begins with the base layer, which can be synthetics such as polypropylene or polyester; silk; wool or other fabrics,” advises Brent Vanni, a product developer at L.L. Bean.

Wool is popular again, in the form of mid-and lightweight base layers. Wool is naturally odor resistant, so it doesn’t need the anti-microbial treatment like the polyesters, adds Vanni, and it provides superior warmth.

Your middle layer should insulate while still allowing moisture to escape. Zoning techniques are popular, which basically means thicker insulations like fleece with different fabrics in specific places in the jacket, such as the core, under the arms and down the sleeves.

When running outside for long periods of time you may need a third layer — a lightweight, windproof, water-resistant (or waterproof), yet breathable jacket. Gore-Tex is still a leader in outdoor wear and has incorporated stretch into their Proshell fabrics now, says Vanni.

2. Choose the right shoes and socks.

“Pay attention to the surface you are running on,” advises Terrence Philbin, DO, an orthopedic surgeon in Westerville, Ohio. “You want plenty of tread if you are running on ice and snow, so you have more grasping power.” At the same time, you need to have your shoe fitted properly. Road or trail running, pay attention to fit, feel and ride.

“Toes should wiggle easily,” says Mike Simensky, a footwear product developer at L.L. Bean, “but feet should not slide around, or be compressed from side to side.” The essentials of fit, feel and ride are mostly the same for trail shoes as for road models: fit the shoe to the foot, make sure it feels comfortable when you move in it, and check to see that it has what you need to ride smoothly over your chosen running surface.

“The outsoles of trail-running shoes have deeper lugs and more aggressive tread patterns” than road running models, which improve stability and traction over slippery or uneven surfaces, according to Simensky. The sole is stiffer to shield feet from bruising, often including a thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) plate or insert sandwiched between midsole and outsole for added protection, often with protective toe counters. Select the shoe that best fits your needs. Better yet, keep more than one pair in your rotation so you’re prepared for changing surface conditions.

When choosing your socks, says Philbin, look for a warm sock that wicks away moisture. Many top brands such as L.L. Bean, Feetures, Wright Sock, Balega, Injini, Thorlo, Smartwool and others offer options made from antimicrobial, moisture-wicking materials such as wool blends that will keep your feet warm in the winter time.

3. Always have a Plan B.

When running outdoors in the winter, don't go so far from indoor warmth that you don't know if you can make it back, warns Philbin. If you get chilled you are on borrowed time, and if your feet are also wet, they will freeze rapidly. Running is demanding on the body even under ideal conditions, and when you add unstable surface conditions, elements such as sleet or snow, and wind, you add to the effort necessary just to do your customary workout. Always be flexible and have a Plan B in case conditions go south.

4. Hydrate!

The body cannot regulate hydration as well in cold weather, according to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and close to 95% of hypothermia cases result when people are not sufficiently hydrated before going out. Fluid consumption during exercise is important, not only to replenish the fluid lost from perspiring, but also fluid lost from the air you exhale. The lesson? Don't forget to drink just because it's cold outside!

5. Play it safe.

Fingers, toes, ears and face are especially vulnerable when running outside in the winter. The ACSM warns that if the temperature is below freezing, ice crystals can form on your skin. Hypothermia can sneak up on you, so don't go out unprepared for the conditions. You can always take off a layer if you get warm. Intense shivering is a warning sign and will be followed by a drop in your body temperature, inability to perform complex tasks and slurred speech. You don't want to go there!

Another safety factor in the winter has to do with fewer daylight hours, slippery roads and maybe sleet and snow. A reflective vest and wrist or leg bands will make you visible in headlights of oncoming vehicles. Add blinking lights on your outer garments — it's better to be seen than sorry!

About The Author:

Sherry Hanson lives on the coast of Maine and has been writing professionally for over 20 years. In a former life she was a fitness and aquatic instructor. Visit her at www.sherryhanson.com.