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5K Training Plan for Beginners

Follow an eight-week run-walk plan from your first one-minute run to running about 30 minutes without stopping, and finish a 5K race or a 5K route of your own.

5-day guide · 5 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Every guide on this site is produced with the Self-Directed Learning Framework: instead of an article that explains a topic at you, it turns the topic into a structure you work through — each chapter with one outcome, a starting action under twelve minutes, the minimum you actually need to know, a worked example, a checklist, and exercises using your own situation. No filler, no re-reading required.

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Choosing Your Starting Week

> **Outcome:** "I know which week of the plan to start in, and I've checked that I'm ready to start at all."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Go for a brisk 20-minute walk today, no running at all. Afterwards, note honestly how it felt: easy, fine, or hard.

The minimum you need to know

A 5K is 5 kilometres, about 3.1 miles. Most beginners who walk-run their first one finish somewhere between 30 and 45 minutes, and that's a perfectly good result. The plan in Chapter 2 starts from nothing: one-minute runs separated by walking. That's the right start if you don't run at all today. If you can already run for five minutes without stopping, you can start in week 3 instead. If you can run for ten minutes, start in week 5. Starting too far ahead is the most common reason beginners give up early. Starting a week too easy costs you nothing. There's one test to pass before week 1: a brisk 20-minute walk should feel comfortable. If it doesn't, walk three times a week for two weeks first, then start the plan. Please also check with a doctor before starting a new exercise programme, especially if you've been inactive for a long time, are pregnant, or have a heart, lung or joint condition, or any other health condition that exercise could affect.

Worked example

Worked example: picking a start for two different people. Two colleagues sign up for the same charity 5K, nine weeks away. One hasn't run since school. The brisk walk feels fine, so they start at week 1 and have a spare week as a buffer. The other jogs occasionally and can run about six minutes before needing to walk, so they start at week 3. That leaves them three spare weeks, which they keep for repeating a week that feels hard. Same race, same plan, different first sessions. Both reach the start line without having skipped anything.

Checklist

- [ ] Brisk 20-minute walk done and honestly rated
- [ ] Longest current non-stop run noted (zero is a valid answer)
- [ ] Starting week chosen: week 1, 3 or 5
- [ ] Spare weeks counted between the start and any race date
- [ ] Checked with a doctor if any health condition or doubt applies

Exercises

1. Write down your longest current non-stop run in minutes.
2. Pick your starting week using the rule above.
3. Count the weeks to your race (if you have one) and note how many spare weeks you have.

The Eight-Week Run-Walk Plan

> **Outcome:** "I have the full eight-week plan written into my calendar, three sessions a week, and I know when to repeat a week."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open your calendar and put in the three session slots for your first week: two on weekdays and one at the weekend, at least a day apart.

The minimum you need to know

Every session starts with a five-minute brisk walk to warm up and ends with five minutes of easy walking. The middle part is the plan, three times a week: Week 1: run 1 minute, walk 2 minutes, repeated 8 times. Week 2: run 2 minutes, walk 2 minutes, 6 times. Week 3: run 3 minutes, walk 2 minutes, 5 times. Week 4: run 5 minutes, walk 2 minutes, 4 times. Week 5: run 8 minutes, walk 2 minutes, 3 times. Week 6: run 12 minutes, walk 2 minutes, twice. Week 7: run 20 minutes, walk 2 minutes, run 5 minutes. Week 8: run 25 to 30 minutes without stopping. For many beginners, that covers most or all of a 5K at an easy pace. If it doesn't, the last stretch can be walked. One rule matters more than the schedule. If you couldn't finish the last session of a week, repeat that week before moving on. Repeating a week isn't failing the plan. It's what the plan is designed for, and it's why Chapter 1 asked you to count spare weeks.

Worked example

Worked example: repeating a week without losing heart. A beginner sails through weeks 1 to 4. In week 5, the first eight-minute run ends after five minutes. They walk the rest of that block, finish the session as a walk-run, and complete the other two week-5 sessions the same way. Following the rule, they repeat week 5. The second time, all three sessions are completed in full. They use up one spare week, then move on to week 6 on schedule for their race.

Checklist

- [ ] Five-minute warm-up walk and five-minute cool-down walk in every session
- [ ] Three sessions a week, with at least one rest day between them
- [ ] Current week's run and walk minutes written where you can see them mid-run
- [ ] Any week with an unfinished final session repeated before moving on
- [ ] Spare weeks used only for repeats, not for skipping ahead

Exercises

1. Write all eight weeks into a calendar or the PDF, starting from your chosen week.
2. Set an interval timer (most phone timer or running apps can do this) for your first week.
3. Mark the weeks you think will be hardest, so a repeat there doesn't surprise you.

How Slow "Easy" Really Is

> **Outcome:** "I can keep my running pace slow enough to finish every interval, using the talk test instead of a watch."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

On your next run interval, say a full sentence out loud halfway through, for example your address. If you can't get it out in one go, slow down until you can.

The minimum you need to know

Almost every beginner runs too fast. Running feels like it should be quick, so the first minute of each interval goes out at a pace that can't last. That turns a manageable session into a struggle. For this plan, the right pace is conversational: you could speak in full sentences while running, even if you'd rather not. This is called the talk test, and it works without a watch or heart-rate monitor. If you can only manage a few words at a time, you're going too fast, even if the pace feels embarrassingly slow. It's common for easy running to be barely quicker than a brisk walk at first. That's fine. The plan builds your ability to keep running for longer, not your speed, and pace comes later on its own.

Worked example

Worked example: the interval that kept failing. A beginner can't finish the three-minute runs in week 3 and assumes they're not fit enough. On the next session they use the talk test at the start of each run and slow to a jog where they can say their full address in one breath. It feels too slow to count. All five three-minute runs are completed, with energy left over for the last one. The only change was the pace.

Checklist

- [ ] Talk test used at the start of every run interval
- [ ] Pace slowed whenever a full sentence wasn't possible
- [ ] No speed targets set for the first eight weeks
- [ ] First minute of each interval run deliberately slower than feels natural
- [ ] Session judged by whether the intervals were finished, not how fast they were

Exercises

1. Do one session using the talk test on every interval, and note whether you finished them all.
2. Run one interval too fast on purpose, then one at talk-test pace, and compare how the last minute felt.
3. Ask someone to walk or cycle beside you for one session and keep talking with them while you run.

Fitting Three Sessions Into a Real Week

> **Outcome:** "I have a weekly routine that survives bad weather, busy days and missed sessions, so the plan doesn't stall."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Pick one fixed time for your first weekday session and set it as a recurring calendar event for the next eight weeks.

The minimum you need to know

Each session takes about 30 to 40 minutes including the warm-up and cool-down, and the plan needs three a week with a rest day between them. The usual pattern is two weekday sessions at a fixed time and one at the weekend. A fixed time works better than "when I have a moment", because the session stops being a decision you have to make each day. Plan for the weeks that go wrong, because some will. If you miss one session, move it to the next free day, as long as there's a rest day before the next session. If you miss a whole week, repeat the last week you completed instead of picking up where the schedule says you should be. For gear, the one thing worth sorting out early is comfortable running shoes that fit. Clothes you already own are fine for the first eight weeks.

Worked example

Worked example: a week that falls apart. A parent's plan is Tuesday and Thursday at 7 am, plus Saturday morning. In week 4, a sick child wipes out Tuesday and Thursday. On Friday, rather than cramming both missed sessions into the weekend, they run Saturday as a normal week-4 session and decide to treat the following week as week 4 again. The plan slips by one week, which uses one of their spare weeks. They avoid back-to-back runs and don't stall or quit.

Checklist

- [ ] Two fixed weekday slots and one weekend slot in the calendar
- [ ] A rest day between every two sessions
- [ ] Rule decided in advance for a missed session (move it) and a missed week (repeat it)
- [ ] Comfortable running shoes that fit
- [ ] Bad-weather backup decided (a different time of day, or an indoor treadmill)

Exercises

1. Set your three sessions as recurring calendar events for all eight weeks.
2. Write your missed-session and missed-week rules on the first page of the PDF.
3. Decide your bad-weather backup before the first rainy day.

Race Week and Race Day

> **Outcome:** "I know how to ease off in the final week and have a simple plan for race morning, from breakfast to the finish line."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Look up the start time and start location of your 5K (or pick a 5K route of your own) and write both down.

The minimum you need to know

In the final week, run your last full-length session two or three days before the race, then do just one short, easy session. Nothing you do in the last few days will make you fitter, but doing too much can leave you tired on the day. Don't try anything new in race week: no new shoes, no new breakfast, no new route to the start. On race morning, eat a light breakfast you've already eaten before a training run, at least an hour or two before the start. Arrive early enough to warm up with a five-minute walk. Then start slower than everyone around you. The excitement of a race start makes almost everyone go off too fast. Run the first kilometre at your talk-test pace, even while people overtake you. If you planned to walk short stretches, walk them without guilt. Many first-time 5K runners do, and they still finish.

Worked example

Worked example: a first 5K, minute by minute. A runner on week 8 has a Saturday 9 am race. Their last 30-minute run is on Wednesday, with an easy 15 minutes on Thursday and rest on Friday. On Saturday they eat their usual toast and banana at 7, arrive at 8:30, walk for five minutes, and start near the back. They hold talk-test pace for the first kilometre while a crowd passes them, then overtake a few of those runners in the last kilometre. They finish in 36 minutes, with one short walk after the water station.

Checklist

- [ ] Last full session two or three days before the race
- [ ] Only one short, easy session after that
- [ ] Nothing new on race day: shoes, breakfast or route
- [ ] Light, familiar breakfast at least an hour or two before the start
- [ ] First kilometre run at talk-test pace, whatever others are doing

Exercises

1. Write your race-week schedule: last long session, short session, rest day.
2. Write down your race-morning timeline backwards from the start time.
3. After the race, write down your time and one thing you'd change, ready for your next one.

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