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Marathon Training Plan for Beginners

Build a complete marathon training plan sized to your own race date and starting fitness — not a generic template, one that actually fits your schedule.

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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CHAPTER 1 OF 5 · DAY 1 · 20 MIN

Choosing Your Plan Length and Confirming You're Ready

> **Outcome:** "I can pick a training plan length that matches my race date and confirm I have the base fitness to start it safely."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Count the weeks between today and race day, and write down how many days a week you've run consistently over the past month. Those two numbers decide everything else in this chapter.

The minimum you need to know

Beginner marathon plans typically run 16 to 20 weeks, but the right length for you depends on both your race date and your existing base — not just the calendar. Before starting marathon-specific training, you should already be able to run comfortably three times a week, totaling roughly 15 miles, for at least a month. Skipping that base and jumping straight into a 16-week plan's long runs is the single most common cause of early injury in first-time marathoners, because the plan assumes fitness you haven't actually built yet. If your race is less than 16 weeks away and that base isn't there, the honest options are picking a later race, or adjusting your goal from a performance target to simply finishing — not pretending the calendar isn't a constraint. Please also check with a doctor before starting a new training program, especially if you're new to regular exercise or have any health condition that affects it.

Worked example

Worked example: picking a start date. Say your race is 18 weeks away, and over the past six weeks you've been running three times a week for about 12 miles total — close to the 15-mile base, but not quite there. Rather than starting an 16-week plan immediately (which would have you building the long run before your weekly base is solid), spend the next two weeks nudging your weekly mileage up toward 15 across the same three runs, then start the 16-week plan — using all 18 of your available weeks without starting underprepared.

Checklist

- [ ] Counted the exact number of weeks between today and race day
- [ ] Confirmed at least a month of running three times a week
- [ ] Confirmed a weekly baseline of roughly 15 miles
- [ ] Picked a plan length (16–20 weeks) that fits both your race date and your base
- [ ] If the base isn't there yet, added base-building weeks before Day 2
- [ ] Written down your race date and your plan's actual start date

Exercises

1. Calculate the weeks between today and race day, and write down your plan start date.
2. Write your average weekly running mileage over the last four weeks, from memory or a running app.

Building Your Weekly Structure

> **Outcome:** "I can lay out a repeatable week: which days I run, which days I rest, and which run is the long one."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Pick which day of the week will be your long run — usually a day with no time pressure — and write it down before reading further.

The minimum you need to know

A beginner week typically has three to four running days: one long run (usually on the weekend), two easy runs, and optionally one slightly longer midweek run. The rest of the week is rest or light cross-training. The only "hard" day for a beginner is the long run — everything else stays at an easy effort, and you never run two hard efforts back to back. What makes the plan actually work isn't heroics on any single day, it's the same pattern repeating, week after week, so your body adapts to a rhythm instead of a series of one-off efforts.

Worked example

Worked example: a sample week. A simple four-day week: Tuesday, an easy 3 miles; Thursday, an easy 4 miles; Saturday, rest or light cross-training; Sunday, the long run, starting around 6 miles and growing week by week per Chapter 3. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday are full rest days. That's the entire structure — the only thing that changes week to week is the long run distance.

Checklist

- [ ] Long run day picked and written down
- [ ] Two to three other running days chosen
- [ ] At least one full rest day in the week
- [ ] No two hard running days scheduled back to back
- [ ] Pattern written down somewhere you'll see it every week
- [ ] Cross-training or rest planned for non-running days

Exercises

1. Write out your exact weekly running pattern for the next four weeks.
2. Block your long-run day on your calendar for the full length of the plan, right now.

CHAPTER 3 OF 5 · DAY 3 · 20 MIN

The Long Run: Building It Without Breaking Down

> **Outcome:** "I can grow my long run week to week without the injury or burnout that comes from adding miles too fast."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write down this week's long run distance and next week's planned distance — add roughly one mile or ten percent, whichever is smaller.

The minimum you need to know

The classic rule is to increase the long run by about one mile or ten percent per week, whichever is less, and to build in a cutback week every three to four weeks where the long run drops by roughly a quarter to a third. Cutback weeks are part of the plan, not a sign you've fallen behind — they're what let your body absorb the previous weeks' load instead of accumulating fatigue on top of fatigue. For a beginner marathon plan, the long run typically peaks around 18 to 20 miles, reached about three weeks before race day, after which volume drops sharply into the taper (Chapter 5). Trying to reach 26.2 miles in training isn't necessary or advisable — the last few miles of race day are carried by the fitness those peak long runs built, plus race-day adrenaline.

Worked example

Worked example: a long run progression. A typical progression might read: week 1, 6 miles; week 2, 7; week 3, 8; week 4 (cutback), 6; week 5, 9; week 6, 10; week 7, 11; week 8 (cutback), 8 — continuing upward with a cutback every three to four weeks until peaking around 18–20 miles roughly three weeks before race day.

Checklist

- [ ] This week's long-run increase is one mile or ten percent, whichever is less
- [ ] A cutback week scheduled every three to four weeks
- [ ] Peak long-run distance and its week identified in advance
- [ ] Long-run distance and total weekly mileage aren't both jumping sharply in the same week
- [ ] Fueling and hydration planned for any run over about ninety minutes
- [ ] Any joint pain that doesn't fade within a day is noted, not run through

Exercises

1. Write your full long-run progression, week by week, up to your peak distance.
2. Mark the cutback weeks on that same list.

Pacing: Running Slow Enough on the Days That Should Be Slow

> **Outcome:** "I can tell, without a stopwatch, whether an easy run is actually easy enough."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

On your next easy run, try to hold a conversation — out loud, or just imagined — for the first ten minutes. If you can't speak in full sentences, slow down.

The minimum you need to know

The most common pacing mistake beginners make is running every single run at the same, slightly-too-fast effort. Easy days — which make up most of the week — should be slow enough to talk in full sentences; this is usually called the "talk test," and it works without any watch or pace chart. Long runs are run at an easy-to-moderate effort too, not race pace — for a first marathon, the goal of the long run is finishing the distance, not rehearsing race speed. Running every easy day too fast is the second most common cause of overuse injury and burnout after mileage jumps (Chapter 3), because it removes the recovery those easy days are supposed to provide.

Worked example

Worked example: two runners, six weeks in. One runner treats every run as "a bit uncomfortable" because it feels more productive — they feel fine for the first six weeks, then develop a nagging shin or knee issue around week eight that forces missed training days. Another runner deliberately slows the easy days using the talk test, feels slower on paper, but arrives at each long run with fresher legs and finishes the plan without a forced break.

Checklist

- [ ] Talk test applied on every easy run
- [ ] Pace slowed down whenever a full sentence isn't possible
- [ ] Long run treated as "finish it," not "race it," for a first marathon
- [ ] Faster effort, if any, saved for only the final weeks before race day
- [ ] Any niggle that doesn't ease within 24–48 hours gets an extra rest day instead of a run

Exercises

1. On your next three easy runs, apply the talk test and note whether you had to slow down.
2. Write one sentence, in your own words, describing what "easy" should feel like for you.

Tapering and Race Week

> **Outcome:** "I can taper properly and walk into race morning rested, not undertrained from backing off too much or overtired from not backing off enough."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write today's date, count back from race day, and mark the date your taper begins — usually two to three weeks before the race.

The minimum you need to know

Tapering means cutting training volume, not intensity entirely, over the final two to three weeks, while keeping your legs moving with a few short efforts at normal pace so they don't feel flat on race morning. A typical taper trims total mileage by roughly a quarter in the first taper week, close to half in the second, and down to a quarter or less of normal volume in the final week. Nothing new in race week: the same breakfast you've rehearsed, the same shoes you've already run twenty-plus miles in, the same fueling and hydration plan tested on a long run — race morning is not the time to try anything untested, however appealing it looks. In the final days, prioritize sleep over any instinct to squeeze in one more hard session, and plan race-morning logistics — arrival time, parking or transit, bag drop — the day before, not the morning of.

Worked example

Worked example: a three-week taper. If your peak training week totaled 40 miles, a typical taper might look like: three weeks out, around 30 miles; two weeks out, around 20–25 miles; final week, 10–15 miles with two or three short efforts at normal pace, then rest. Race-morning breakfast and gear are whatever you already used before your longest training runs — not something new bought the week of the race.

Checklist

- [ ] Taper start date marked, two to three weeks before race day
- [ ] Mileage reduced by roughly a quarter in the first taper week
- [ ] Mileage reduced further in the second taper week
- [ ] Final week kept to the lowest volume, with a couple of short, easy efforts only
- [ ] No new food, gear, or pacing plan introduced in race week
- [ ] Race-morning logistics planned the day before, not the morning of
- [ ] Sleep prioritized over any last-minute extra training

Exercises

1. Write your three-week taper mileage targets as rough numbers.
2. List your exact race-morning gear and food — all already tested during training.
3. Write down your arrival and logistics plan for race morning.

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