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Crossing Up Your Routine

The crisp breeze on your face, the rhythmic strike of your feet, the beating of your heart and the fresh air flowing through your lungs while beads of sweat flow down your brow. These are some of the simple pleasures of running.

But running is not an activity for everyone and it is not easy at times. There are days where you feel like you can run forever and others where you may not even go a mile before feeling completely winded. Once you make running a part of your routine, it becomes both addictive and rewarding, physically and mentally. Yet it is important to not run as your sole form of exercise if you are looking to optimize speed, distance and the overall quality of your work out. This is where cross training becomes important.

When I ask runners if they cross train, I get mixed responses. Some runners don't want to think about doing other exercises. Others have a running and cross-training program as part of their weekly schedule. Most experienced and elite runners will cross train because it can help them progress to the next level. The body is an amazing machine, but it can also grow accustomed to a work out. The body has a capacity to learn daily routines. You can't run a certain distance every day and then expect to be able to run longer distances without training. That's why your running schedule should fluctuate between short and long runs when you are training for a 5K, 10K, 25K or even a marathon. This creates muscle confusion, so your body does not fall into a specific pattern. Doing one activity repeatedly without changing up a routine is much like continually driving a car in a circle (with apologies to NASCAR): it can wear the tire treads abnormally and cause alignment issues. In your body, this can lead to boredom, muscle imbalances, stagnant conditioning and, most importantly, overuse injuries.

Cross training is good for any athlete in any sport. It makes you a more proficient and well-rounded athlete and will help you take your workouts to the next level. You may even notice that you can reach or exceed your goals much more quickly. You don't have to give up your running routine, but taking a day or two off during the week will help your body become more efficient in running. Research has shown that cross training improves the balance and strength of muscle groups not typically targeted in running, increases blood flow to muscles, enhances heart function, boosts weight loss and reduces injuries.

Incorporating cross training can be as simple as adding a bike ride, swim, aqua jog, boot camp class or yoga/Pilates program. All these activities have specific benefits. Swimming will help to target upper body and aerobic capacity, whereas yoga and Pilates will target core strength and flexibility. Other alternatives include rowing, cross country skiing and ice skating. The point is to target areas of the body that aren't targeted in running.

The timing of your cross training will depend on your running experience. Higher level runners should consider cross training on a low-mileage run day as well as the day before a longer run, which will allow relative rest in preparation for the long run. If you are more of a recreational runner, consider running 3- 4 days a week and supplementing with cross training 2-3 days a week. If you find yourself getting bored with running, increasing your cross-training days may help re-inspire you.

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If you have any questions on creating a cross-training program or if you have any concerns in regards to an injury or pain, do not hesitate to reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Orthopedics at (616) 267-8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our [website](#).
