

Fiona in Focus

Tips for 5K rookies

While most people visiting this site are hard core weekend warriors who would sooner miss a friend's wedding than give up a chance to race, there are undoubtedly some people who might have stumbled upon it for the first time. Perhaps you are ready to take part in your first 5K but don't know how to start. If so, welcome to our crazy world. As we know, there is a learning curve involved in everything we do so here are a few tips to help you feel more comfortable as you toe the line at your race.



I remember telling my mother-in-law that the entry fee for a particular race was only \$20. A look of disbelief crossed her face. "You mean you have to pay to run?" Clearly the idea of paying to suffer was a strange concept to her. Entry fees vary from race to race depending on the attached frills and goodie bag. At the lower end of the scale there are races that offer the basics -- a measured course, accurate timing and a few post-race refreshments. There may or may not be medals for age group winners. These races usually cost around \$15-\$20.

One step up are slightly more expensive races that offer a race T-shirt, a larger variety of refreshments and perhaps trophies for overall winners as well as medals for age group winners. The costs of these races are in the \$25-30 range.

Then there are the wildly popular themed races. If you would like to enjoy a few alcoholic beverages to celebrate your achievement, you might wish to consider a race organized by a local brewery. If you fancy being blasted with colored paint, maybe you should look into a color run. If getting dirty and overcoming obstacles are your thing, consider a mud run. Themed races vary in price but might cost you between \$40-\$50.

As this article is geared toward runners entering their first 5K, I will not discuss marathons or trail races here. That comes later! We have to pace ourselves.

So let's assume you've decided to take the plunge and sign up for a race. You can either do this in advance online or on the day itself at the race site. Race day registration will be more expensive, so if you plan ahead you can save money for your next race.

While it is probably true that most people can run a 5K, it is also true that some will fare better than others. Training for an event is always a good idea and it is helpful to have an idea of what to expect on race day. At the very least you should measure out 5K with your car so you are familiar with the distance you will be covering.

The evening before the race, pay attention to the food and drink you consume. Eating a heavy meal will not do you any favors and excessive alcohol is generally not recommended.

Avoid eating a heavy breakfast on race morning. A 5K is not a marathon. Providing the fuel to last the distance does not require wolfing down a plate of bacon and eggs or a dozen donuts. I do know one talented runner who enjoys a pre-race donut but he is definitely the exception to the rule! A power bar or some cereal a couple of hours before race start is usually sufficient and will help you avoid cramping up mid-race.

Always dress accordingly. While it might feel a little chilly when you leave home, you will warm up significantly during the race and will regret your large fleecy top or comfy sweatpants. See what the young runners at the front of the pack are wearing. They have experience and generally wear the right clothes. Less is usually better.

Arrive in time. Calculate how long it takes to drive to the event and plan to arrive at least 30 minutes prior to the race start. This will allow you to figure out the course, hydrate, visit the restrooms and calm your nerves. Do not show up 2 minutes before the start of the race and expect everyone to wait for you. This won't happen.

If you register with a friend, child, parent and pick up several bibs at the same time, make sure each person has the correct bib assigned to them. When runners inadvertently switch bibs, it messes up the results and causes all sorts of confusion.

Pin your bib on the front of your shirt or shorts. That way race photographers can e-mail you photographs taken of you during the race.

Do not line up with the elites unless you feel you can give them a run for their money. After a few races you will know where to position yourself in the pack. Starting a little farther back helps prevent you starting out too fast. Many runners, particularly youngsters, start out at breakneck speed, their arms working like little pistons, propelling them forward. Generally after 400 meters the pistons will fall to their sides as the realization sinks in that a 5K is not a sprint.

Remember that running is not a contact sport. While jostling at the start of a race is inevitable, there is no reason for athletes to be running elbow to elbow when the field opens up. Runners respect one another's space. I remember one small 5K where I was almost tripped by a runner who, for some inexplicable reason, felt compelled to shadow me for the first mile as if we were running on a track. He later commented that I had almost tripped him with my windmill-like gait. The calm person in my head politely explained I wasn't used to running in such close proximity to another runner while the other part of me did an excellent job of remaining quiet.

If you decide for some reason to slow down to a walk mid-race please do so carefully. Do not simply slam on the brakes and stand in the middle of the road to tie your shoelace. Carefully check behind you and step to the side to avoid any unpleasant collisions. Do not partner with other walkers and walk three abreast, arms swinging. Stay aware of runners around you at all times.

Avoid wearing headphones. It is important to be aware of your breathing and the sounds

around you. The last thing you want when running a 5K is to get lost on the course, so being able to hear volunteers indicate where to turn is always helpful. I do know one elite runner who enjoys listening to tunes while she races but again she is the exception to the rule and is experienced enough to know what she is doing.

Avoid carrying water bottles or hydration vests. Most races will have water available for runners at some point during the race. This should be more than sufficient for your hydration needs.

While this may not answer all the questions new runners may have regarding racing, hopefully it will provide some helpful hints. Now you have no more excuses. Regardless of what happens you will have a blast and since it's your first 5K you will have set a PR. Savor the moment and enjoy the chance to mingle with fellow racers and find out about the next event on the race calendar.