

INVICTUS

SPORTS PERFORMANCE AND FITNESS

Four Cross Training Modalities for Runners

Importance of cross training to boost performance and prevent injuries



If you're a runner there's a good chance you'd choose running over any other type of cardio. Unfortunately, running too much can cause issues for runners of all ages and abilities. If your body isn't yet adapted to the workload you are putting on it you are at risk of overuse injuries like fractures and strains. Luckily, by adding in other types of cardio, known as cross training, you can still improve your cardiovascular health and aerobic capacity without the strain of high-impact activity (1).

There are a variety of ways to get your cross training in and as long as you do it with purpose you are still likely to see fitness adaptations. You will probably even find that you start to look forward to "off" days from running and may even become passionate about other forms of cardio. Keep in mind that while you may explore various modalities when it comes to keep your aerobic engine humming, strength training is equally as important to keep in the mix. Strength lays the foundation for longevity and helps lower the risk of both short and long term injuries.

Whether you are a beginner runner or an elite athlete, it's wise to have cross training baked into your running schedule. Running coaches often prescribe 1-2 cross training sessions a weekend depending on an athlete's volume and experience level. These sessions can range anywhere from 15 minutes up to 3 hours depending on what type of event, if any, you are training for.

As long as you elevate your heart rate into the proper zone you can build up your aerobic capacity with cross training and how you do it is up to you. Speed and incline walking, swimming, biking, snowshoeing, and even hiking can all be used as cross training modalities if you perform them correctly (1). Let's dive into three common cross training modalities for runners.

Cycling

We love cycling as a form of cross training because you can do it quite literally anywhere. Mountain, road, and gravel biking are all forms of cycling that can be used as a running substitute and each one has its perks. While there are expensive options for the bikes needed for these activities you can typically find an affordable option on your local Marketplace and you don't need anything fancy when doing it only part time.

INVICTUS

SPORTS PERFORMANCE AND FITNESS

You can also go to your local gym and use a spin, assault, or recumbent bike. If working out at home appeals to you then we highly recommend getting a spin bike of some sort. They are affordable and take up little space. Cycling doesn't use all of the same muscles as running in the same ways but it is very leg dominant and can improve your VO₂ max. Keep the pace at a steady Zone 2 for fat burning or challenge your muscles with a sprint interval workout. Cycling allows for versatile workouts while decreasing impact on the body.

Rowing

Rowing can be an acquired taste for some, though is arguably one of the best workouts you can challenge yourself with. The most common way to complete a rowing workout is on a rowing machine in a gym. Rowing machines can be fun because some of them have a game aspect where each row equates to a play in a game on a screen. Like running, it's important to use proper form when rowing and it may take some time to get used to. Prioritize nailing the form prior to going the distance.

If comfortable and confident on the water, you can take your rowing outdoors. Keep in mind that your heart rate must be in the aerobic zone to benefit from the workout on a cardiovascular level but the fact that the movements of rowing are different than those of running does not take away from the positive impact it will have on your running performance and fitness (2).

Skiing

Much like rowing, you can use skiing as a cross training activity both indoors and outdoors. There is a machine called a ski erg that simulates the skiing motion and it's similar to a rower in build but the way you move is much different. Doing a workout on the ski erg can easily get your heart pumping and squads and triceps burning. This machine mimics the motion of skiing in the way that you have to use your legs. Similar to both cycling and rowing, you can set the pace for a longer cardio session or program intervals based on time or distance.

If working out in the elements is more your style then skiing outdoors can also be a great cross-training option for runners, especially cross-country skiing. Cross-country skiing is an excellent non impact running activity and is enjoyed by many skilled runners, especially trail runners. This is because it allows you to be outside in nature and like running, you can move across land for as short or long of a distance as you like. As long as your heart rate is in the aerobic zone then this is a great running substitute.

Swimming

Swimming is our top choice of cross training modalities due to two factors- 1. It recruits the entire muscular system for a full body workout and 2. Comes with the lowest risk of injury. If running is your number one priority, there's no use risking injury in activities you're simply using to keep your fitness up. Swimming comes with the benefit of allowing the body to motion freely, challenges and demands full range of motion within the joints, and is incredible for core strength, a key component of running well.

Finding a local pool can be more challenging in rural areas compared to that of urban settings. If weather allows, find a local watering hole that's deemed safe for swimming. If you're swimming alone, always ensure someone knows where you are, and wear a buoy for good measure. Get comfortable in a controlled environment such as the pool before taking on open water swims.

INVICTUS

SPORTS PERFORMANCE AND FITNESS

There's no universally right way to cross train as everyone's goal is different. If you're looking to spare yourself from an increased risk of injuries such as fractures, ensure you're both lifting heavy to aid in bone density, and splicing in aerobic alternatives with your running schedule.

Sources

1. Effect of aerobic cross training and aerobic training on cardiovascular endurance. (2016, International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health).
2. Effects of specific versus cross-training on running performance. (1995, European journal of applied physiology and occupational physiology).