

**Women's Health**



# HALF-MARATHON

**TRAINING GUIDE**

By Rozalynn S. Frazier

# WHY

## SHOULD YOU RUN A HALF-MARATHON?

Looking for your next challenge?  
The half-marathon may be just the goal you need.



Hugely popular—1.79 million folks toed the line for this distance in 2019, with 60 percent of the field identifying as female, according to Running USA's "2020 U.S. Running Trends" report—running 13.1 miles is basically a sweet spot for runners. Be it a one-and-done bucket list item or your stepping stone to a

greater distance, a half-marathon pushes you out of your comfort zone while testing your will and endurance. At the same time, the training feels doable and doesn't take over your life. Plus, it's a pretty cool achievement to add to your running repertoire.

### ▼ THAT DOESN'T MEAN THE DISTANCE WILL BE EASY.

In fact, it can't be downright daunting for casual joggers and more seasoned runners alike. "It's a race that requires a bit more training, discipline, and planning for runners looking to take it to that next level," says Jasmine Nesi, a USATF certified running coach, an instructor at Mile High Run Club in New York City, and cofounder of RUNGRL.

"It can be intimidating, but it's manageable—and the sense of accomplishment at the end, and medal, is priceless!"

### ▼ TO SUCCEED, THOUGH, YOU HAVE TO TRAIN.

That's why we tapped Nesi to pull together this 12-week training plan to help put you on the path to success. This guide has everything you need—even cross-training and nutrition tips from other experts—to get you across that finish line.

**Now, who's ready to run?**

# WHAT

## YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HALF-MARATHONS

### ▼ THE DISTANCE

No matter how you slice it, a **half-marathon is 13.1 miles**, and you've got to go the distance to reap the rewards. That said, one of the biggest questions first-timers have is whether or not they will get to the finish line in time. A valid concern, considering half-marathons generally have time limits. A good rule of thumb: **Expect to have to cross the finish line in about 3 hours and 30 minutes, which is 16:02 minutes per mile.** Still, be sure to research the time regulations on the specific race you want to run. (FYI, many of the half-marathons in the Rock 'n' Roll franchise have a generous 4-hour limit, meaning you'll just have to maintain an 18:19 minute pace per mile.)

Time limits are put in place to ensure you have the necessary support—medical help, water or sports drinks, road closures—to stay safe on the course. Also, many of these time limits ensure you aren't running in the hottest part of the day, which can not only stress the body even more, but put you at risk for issues such as dehydration or various heat-related illnesses.

Not sure how to tell if your current running times will meet the criteria? "Your long runs can be a good indication of your race pace, or a good time to test out if your goal race pace is feasible," says Nesi. Look at the pace per mile you're currently running and multiply that by 13.1, and then add a little cushion, maybe 5 or 10 minutes, to be safe.

### ▼ THE TRAINING

Think back to high school. Ever not study quite hard enough for an exam—and then find yourself spiraling on test day? Super unpleasant right? Well, that's kind of what not training properly for a half-marathon is like—except the torture will last longer, and your attempt will almost certainly end in injury.

"There's nothing worse than feeling unprepared on race day," says Nesi.

**"Sticking to a plan allows you to not only physically, but mentally, prepare for the 13.1 journey."**

**A good plan will allow the body to gradually get used to being put under stress.** "This causes the physiological changes that strengthen the muscles, bones, and cardiorespiratory system to allow an individual to run 13.1 miles," explains Alex Rothstein, CSCS, coordinator and instructor for the exercise science program at New York Institute of Technology. "The gradual part is key to help prevent overtraining and ultimately an injury."

This half-marathon training program, designed by Nesi, does just that, **gradually growing your mileage over 12 weeks**, while also allowing for recovery weeks interspersed where your mileage decreases. The idea here is to give you a solid foundation, steadily progress your miles as well your confidence, and then give you some time to rest up and reflect on all the strides you've made.

Throughout this training, which Nesi describes as "spicy," you'll encounter different types of runs. These, Nesi explains, each have their own job, working different muscles, parts of your body, and energy systems to help build your endurance, speed, and beef up your cardiovascular system.

### ▼ THE GLOSSARY

To navigate this training plan, you'll need to understand the following terms:

#### **EASY PACE:**

A run that is a **low-intensity effort** and is controlled and comfortable. Think of it as a recovery; you don't want to tax the body too much.

#### **HILL REPEATS:**

Using a **hill with a moderate incline**, sprint up it fast and then jog down it at an easy pace to recover. Repeat the sequence for the required time. These workouts help increase things like aerobic power and leg strength.

#### **TRACK WORKOUT:**

**Interval-based runs (read: short and fast)**, that are best run on a track. For example in this plan, you may see something like 3x400m. This means you'll run 400 meters or one lap around the track three times.

#### **TEMPO RUN:**

A sustained, faster-than-usual effort (**not a full-on sprint!**) that works to build your speed endurance.

#### **PROGRESSION RUN:**

These runs are all about acceleration. **Begin slowly, then gradually increase your pace** throughout the run. The goal: finish faster than you started.

#### **GOAL HM PACE:**

This is literally **the pace you are targeting for race day.** This offers an opportunity to help practice your goal pace while also boosting your confidence.



# THE PLAN

WEEKS 1+2: ESTABLISH FOUNDATION

WEEKS 3+4: PROGRESSION

WEEKS 5+6: CONSISTENCY

WEEKS 7+8: CONFIDENCE

WEEKS 9+10: PEAK

WEEKS 11+12: TAPER / CELEBRATION

WEEK	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	WEEK TOTAL
1	3 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	REST	REST DAY	4 MILES	REST	7
2	3 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	2 MILES Easy Pace		5 MILES	REST	10
3	3 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	4 MILES Easy Pace		6 MILES	REST	13
4	2 MILES	4 MILES 1600m warm-up 4X800M 90sec active recovery in between 1600M cooldown	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	3 MILES Easy Pace		7 MILES	REST/ YOGA	16
5	4 MILES	HILL REPEATS 1mile warm-up 4X30 SEC repeats (jog on downhill) 1MILE cooldown	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	3 MILES Easy Pace		5 MILES	REST/ YOGA	15
6	3 MILES	4 MILES 1600m warm-up 2x1000m 2x800m 3x400m 1600M cooldown	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	3 MILE Progression Run		5 MILES	REST/ YOGA	18
7	5 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	3 MILES Easy Pace		10 MILES	REST/ YOGA	18
8	2 MILES	HILL REPEATS 1mile warm-up 4X30 SEC repeats (jog on downhill) 1MILE cooldown	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	5 MILES Goal HM / Tempo Pace		8 MILES	REST/ XTRAIN	18
9	4 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	5 MILES Easy Pace		11 MILES	REST	20
10	3 MILES	4 MILES 1600m warm-up 4X800M 90sec active recovery in between 1600M cooldown	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	5 MILE Progression Run		8 MILES	REST/ XTRAIN	20
11	4 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	4 MILES Goal HM / Tempo Pace		6 MILES	XTRAIN	14
12	4 MILES	REST	XTRAIN Runners Choice!	REST		2 MILES	RACE DAY!	19.1

# CROSS-TRAINING

Training is about more than just putting in miles. Cross training, which you will also find in this plan, is key too. It helps decrease the risk of burnout from too much running while challenging the muscles and joints in a new way so you can maintain training momentum.

▼  
**CROSS-TRAINING CAN ALSO BOOST YOUR RUNNING GAINS, SAYS ROTHSTEIN.**

For example: Weight-training can strengthen postural and weight-bearing muscles that are used during running; **cycling helps strengthen the leg muscles and mimics the endurance requirement of running while lowering the impact experienced from pavement**; and swimming allows you to focus more on breathing and developing body awareness.

"It is important to remember that there really is no perfect substitute for the specific activity of running, but it is also important to remember that a great runner does not need to run every day, and in fact should not run every day," he adds "The positive adaptations occur when we rest the body not while we train it."



▼  
**YOU MAY ALSO WANT TO DEVELOP A BIT OF A MENTAL STRATEGY TOO,**

which Nesi says plays a huge role. "When your body starts to give up, your brain has to keep you going," she says. "The phrase 'your body won't go where your mind won't take it' is 100 percent true." For this reason, Nesi has a ton of mantras that she keeps on hand for when training (and race day) becomes grueling and she, or her athletes, need a little extra push: "**This is temporary.**" "**Trust your training.**" "You can do hard things." Research shows that self-talk can lower your rate of perceived exertion as well as enhance endurance performance, so use one of Nesi's mantras, or develop one that speaks to you and repeat it to yourself when things get tough.

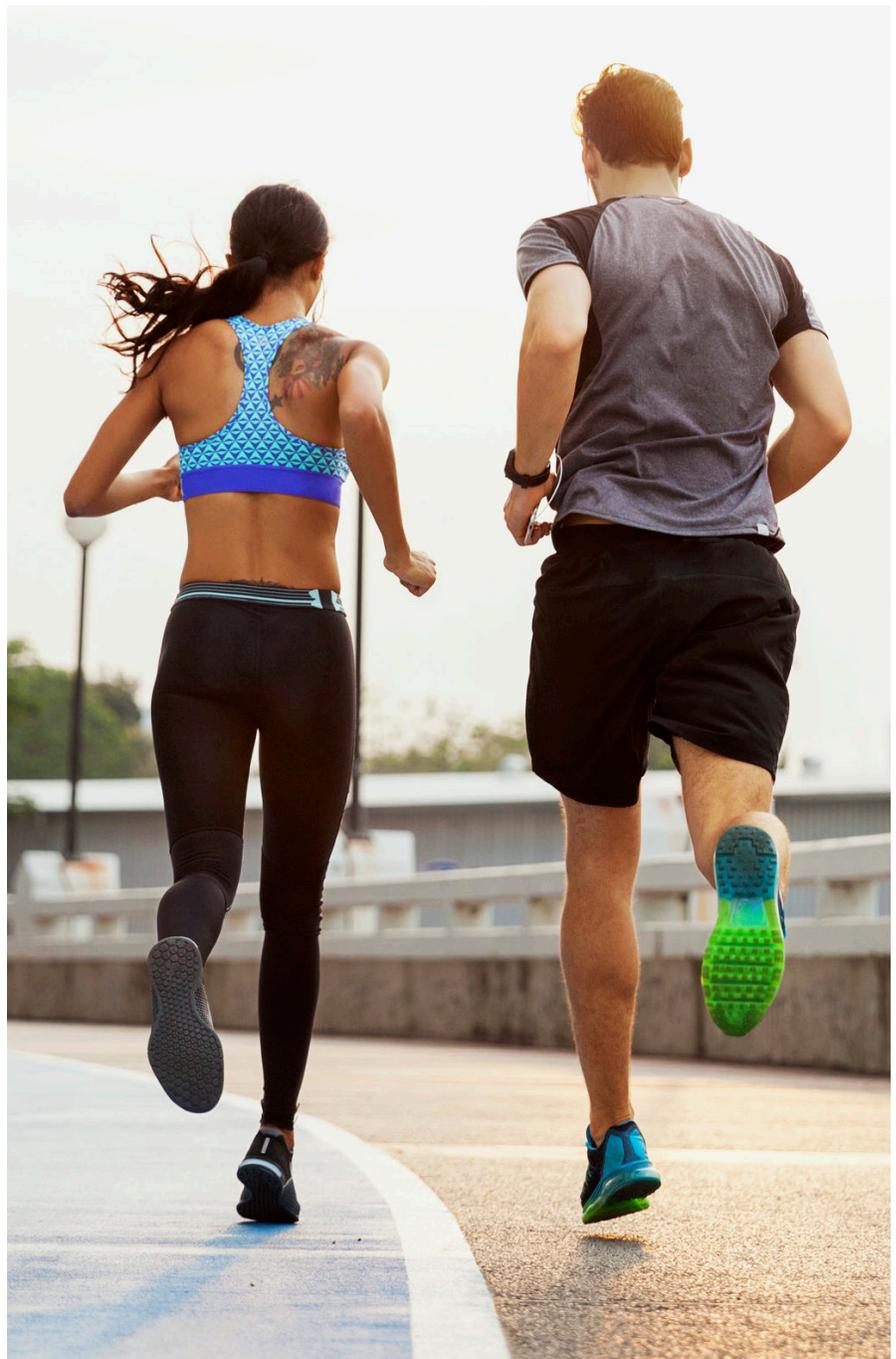
Understand, though, no training block is perfect. Life can sometimes get in the way—be it work, vacation, or an injury—which can cause a setback in your training. **Nesi warns not to beat yourself up about missing days.** "Realize that every day is a new opportunity to get back to your training plan," she says. Just don't try to make up for the runs you've missed—doing two-a-day runs or trying to pick back up exactly where you left off. You need to "ease back into your miles and take inventory of how your body feels." If you pulled back due to injury, make sure you have the all-clear from your doctor before lacing back up.

# THE TAPER

As you end the near of your training—with this specific plan that's during weeks 11 and 12—you'll enter the "taper," which is where you begin scaling back on your running volume. Yes, this may seem counterintuitive, as the entire half-marathon training process has been about ramping up your mileage. But, giving your body this short reprieve is essential in helping it get primed to tackle the 13.1 on the horizon.

“Pushing your body up until race day can actually work against you,” says Nesi, who notes that overtraining can lead to injury (think stress factors and strains) and a host of other issues, including a decline in performance, persistent fatigue, lack of motivation, sleep issues, and more. Instead, the goal, Nesi says, is “conserving energy, so you have fresh legs heading into the race.” In other words: pulling back on your miles allows your body to recover, minimizing fatigue, so that you reach your optimal performance on race day.

Research backs this up, with a review of studies in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* showing that tapering is linked to beneficial physiological, psychological and performance adaptations.



# THE PREP

You've put in the work and your race is literally around the corner. Your only goal should be to not screw it up. Believe me, that's not as easy as it sounds. To help you sidestep some last-minute pitfalls—be it the week before you pound the pavement for 13.1 miles or your actual race day—keep these expert-backed tips and tricks in mind.



## GET SOME GOOD SLEEP

We get it: You nerves are going to be on 1000 the night before (and day of), but **sleep is essential**. Try to get some quality shuteye in the nights leading up to the race. That way, you aren't showing up to the starting line with a complete sleep deficit.



## MAKE SURE EVERYTHING IS CHARGED

Not everyone is a running purist, some of us need gadgets—**so make sure all of yours (phone, running watch, wireless headphones) are fully powered up**. Nothing can ding your morale like cruising through the miles with your power playlist pumping, and then all of a sudden facing total silence because you're out of juice.



## DON'T DO ANYTHING NEW

This is not the time to buy new shoes, get that deep tissue massage you've been thinking about, or try any new gels, says Nesi. "**For race day, you want to be comfortable and keep your same routine** to put you most at ease on race morning," she says.

## HAVE A PLAN

Nesi advises **having a plan for getting to the starting line and one to meet your friends and family after the race**. Also essential: "Ask your friends and family to line up around the areas where you know it will be tough, suggests Nesi, such as mile 11, which is where this training plan tops out. Every step after that, if this is your first half-marathon, is the longest you've ever run. Seeing a familiar face as you tackle this new territory can offer a much-needed adrenaline boost.

## BREAK DOWN YOUR RACE

Rather than looking at the **half-marathon as 13.1 (kinda terrifying!) miles, divide it into sections**, which mentally can be easier to digest. For example, break your half into the first five miles, the second five miles, and then the last 5K (3.1 miles), working to tackle the race section by section. This can make the distance feel far less daunting.

## ENJOY YOURSELF

Soak in the race experience! "From packet pickup to the energy at the start line to the crowds along the course, **this is the celebration lap for all your hard training**," says Nesi.

**So revel in every moment—you've certainly earned it.**



## NOURISH YOURSELF

"The right foods can help fuel runs, support endurance, and heal from the wear and tear running puts on the body, to optimize recovery and reduce injury risk," explains Cynthia Sass, RD, CSSD, an LA-based sports and performance nutritionist. Her recs for pre-race fueling: whole foods high in easy-to-digest, nutrient-rich carbs, and low in fat and protein (**think oatmeal, bananas, brown rice, roasted sweet potato, and fingerling potatoes**). You should also remember to replace the electrolytes lost when you sweat. Since you'll be running for longer than an hour, "consume 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrate per hour as a fuel source," adds Sass. "That carb may be in your sports drink, or can come from energy chews, gel, or bars if you use a carb-free electrolyte drink." (Be sure to test this out during your training!) And, once you cross that finish line, don't forget to refuel. Sass's recs: a combo of colorful veggies, lean protein, good fat, and whole-food carbs, like a smoothie made with leafy greens, pea protein powder, nut butter, and fruit, or a bowl made with veggies, lentils, avocado, and quinoa.