

Measuring success

When it comes to tracking your progress, the scales shouldn't be the only tool you use. A variety of factors that have nothing to do with your speed or eating habits can drive the scales skyward, throw off your race times and drive you absolutely nuts. We live and die by these numbers: they can make us swell with confidence we never thought possible or send us reeling into dark caves of depression. After all, who wants to spend precious hours and days trying to eat right and run better if, according to the numbers, it's not working? The resulting slump can be pretty bad, leaving you in a "Why bother?" state of mind. Suddenly, you find yourself skipping your next workout and succumbing to a fried Deliveroo feast.

When it comes to numbers, here's what we think: tracking progress works, but single tools used in isolation – whether it's the scales, the finish-line clock, your training watch, a body-composition test, blood pressure and cholesterol levels, or even how many squats you could do today – can't tell the whole story of how you feel, or how much fitter you're becoming.

Because each metric has its limitations, and because progress rarely occurs in a straightforward upward trajectory, it's wise to measure as many metrics as possible without risking obsession and compulsion. That way, your sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from all the hard work you do isn't completely dependent on



CHEW ON THIS

In your life as a whole, even the most hi-tech gadget won't be able to detect some of the most important measures of success – such as your confidence, your effectiveness at work and the happiness of your loved ones. Regardless of what any electronic readout tells you, the miles you run and the food you eat should improve your quality of life, not diminish it. If your family is feeling neglected, your boss is annoyed or you just feel dissatisfied, none of those metrics matters. So, as you look at the numbers, try not to lose sight of the big picture: your own happiness, the contentment of your loved ones and the parts of your life you care about count for a lot.

a single measure, which could be way off for any number of factors that have nothing to do with what you're consuming or your running progress. Using three to five metrics, which you can take at a variety of different frequencies, is a good place to start.

Here are some key measures of success and how to work with them.

The scales

Why they matter Trying to change something specific without tracking whether that

something is changing is an invitation for frustration or delusion. In one of the key findings of the National Weight Control Registry, a long-term US study of people who'd lost an average of 30kg and kept it off for at least five years, 75% of all participants weighed themselves at least once a week.

Many of the headlines that urge you to throw out the scales warn of their limitations – and those should be real considerations. Your body weight can fluctuate throughout the day, and from day to day, due to factors including your hormones, dehydration, the amount of carbs or sodium in your last meal, and even constipation.

When to measure First thing in the morning, naked, after you've been to the bathroom but before you eat or drink anything.

How often No more than once a day. Given how many factors can make your weight fluctuate, weighing yourself any more often is a waste of time. Stepping on the scales after a satisfying sprints session could be deceiving: you can lose more than a kilo in sweat in just 30 minutes of hard running.

What they leave out Whether you're getting faster and how much you're improving your body composition by increasing your muscle mass and decreasing your body-fat percentage. The scales also won't measure whether your blood pressure, cholesterol levels and risk of chronic disease are heading in the right direction.

Your mileage and pace

Why they matter It's important to ramp up your mileage and speed very gradually to prevent injury and allow your body to adapt to new stresses and get stronger. In general, you don't want to increase either factor by more than 10% from one week to the next. Taking detailed notes on how many miles you run, your pace, how you feel and the shoes you wear can

help you detect injuries or signs of burnout before they derail you.

How often Every time you run.

What they leave out What you're eating. If your goal is to lose kilos but you're replenishing all the calories you burned after every workout, you're sabotaging any weight-loss benefits you'd get from your workouts. By the same token, if you're restricting your calories or carbs too much, going into every run feeling depleted and hitting the wall before you finish the day's mileage, you're handicapping your workouts before you even hit the road. While a training journal will offer some clues about what's helping – or hurting – your weight-loss efforts, how you fuel your running machine is a huge part of it, too.

5K times

Why they matter In a 5K race setting, you're running at the fastest pace you can sustain. This is a great way to measure your aerobic fitness and running performance. It's also an effective means of testing your racing and fuelling tactics. Since the race itself involves a very small time commitment and the training required to make real improvement can be as little as nine miles per week, it's an accessible way to measure your fitness. What's more, because races typically offer aid stations, cheering spectators, a measured course and automated timing, you're set up for success. For accurate comparisons, find races on courses with similar elevation profiles. Some running clubs have race series on the same course, as do Parkruns, so you can fairly measure your fitness gains. If one 5K race is on a flat course and your next one is hilly, you won't be able to fairly compare your times.

When to measure At the beginning of your fitness programme.

How often Every six to eight weeks.

employs the right equation to translate those measurements into an estimate of body fat.

How often As your training progresses and as you make improvements, checking in on your body comp can be a great pat on the back. You might consider getting it checked as you move from one cycle of training to another – say, at the beginning of your marathon-training programme, then just before the race.

What it leaves out How you feel, any dietary changes and your running speed. And it won't reflect your risk of every chronic disease.

Your trousers

Why they matter These can offer an instant assessment of how well you're trimming your waistline and whittling away the belly fat that is linked to so many chronic diseases. They can also offer a big confidence boost, which counts for a lot. There's no better feeling than knowing you can fit into your skinny jeans. And nothing can keep you more honest than how you feel in your trousers.

When to measure Before you've eaten – ideally first thing in the morning.

How often Once a week.

What they leave out Whether you're getting faster, your weight and your overall health.

Your macronutrients (carbs, fats, protein)

Why they matter Runners need all three macronutrients to run well. Diets that eliminate one group just can't give you the fuel you need to run your best, unleash your fitness potential and, ultimately, lose weight. For instance, if you try to completely cut out fats, which help the body absorb vitamins

and minerals among other important physiological functions, you'll set yourself up for nutrient deficiencies and injury. If you try to completely cut out carbs, you'll starve your body of its best energy source for running and set yourself up to run out of energy well before you're done with your runs. By counting macronutrients, you can ensure that you're getting all the nutrients you need to run well.

When to measure At every meal.

How often Every day.

What they leave out The quality of the food you're eating. You can meet the recommended targets and still be consuming foods that aren't going to be any good for your waistline, your race times or your long-term health. Yes, that processed "health" bar will deliver a convenient 20g protein hit, so it'll help you meet your daily target, but it won't truly satisfy you. More importantly, it can't provide the nutrition or sense of satiation that the same amount of protein in more natural foods such as eggs, tuna or even Greek yogurt offers.

Calories

Why they matter We should all be aware that weight loss is not as simple as calories in and calories out. But it can be extremely beneficial to know how many calories you need to fuel your running, especially when you step up the mileage, and what your daily calorie limits should be in order to lose weight. Your best bet is to work with a registered dietitian to determine what your daily target should be, but even just the process of counting calories and looking up how many each food contains can be eye-opening. You might find that the coffee-shop breakfast brioche you ate while barely thinking about it actually loads you up with half a day's worth of calories before you even get to your morning meeting. And you may see that the bag of trail mix you don't even enjoy is inflating your daily calorie intake far more than a few squares of satiating

What they leave out If your diet is still out of whack, it's not going to show up immediately in your 5K results. Because factors such as wind, heat and the hilliness of a course can impinge on your race times, the number on the finish-line clock will not always be a direct reflection of your complete fitness profile or the dietary changes you're making.

Resting heart rate

Why it matters If your heart isn't healthy, it's likely that your running, weight-loss and overall health goals will remain out of reach. As you get fitter and build your aerobic power, your heart won't have to work as hard as it did before. Think about climbing the stairs: if you're unfit, you'll probably feel out of breath at the top, with your heart pounding hard and fast in a panicky thump. As you strengthen your heart through running, with each beat it can pump more blood. That means it'll take fewer beats to pump the blood you need to power your body up the stairs, or around a Parkrun. So, as you get fitter, your resting heart rate should go down.

When to measure First thing in the morning. Before you get out of bed, take your pulse for one minute and write it down.

How often Daily.

What it leaves out If the weather is hot, you're stressed, sick, sleep-deprived or in any other altered condition, your resting heart rate might be affected. It also doesn't measure your dietary improvements or any changes in your body composition.

How fast you're running

Why it matters The same thing we said about the scales applies here: if your goal is to get

faster, it's important to track your pace to get a sense of how fast you're going.

When to measure On any run.

How often On every run.

What it leaves out If the weather is hot and humid, you're injured or you've fallen short on sleep, your pace is likely to slow and your level of effort is sure to spike. It also doesn't directly measure how you feel on each run (though if you feel awful, your average pace probably will reflect that) and can't reflect your strength. Your running pace also doesn't measure any dietary changes that could be either improving or derailing your running efforts, or lowering or raising your risk of chronic disease.

Body composition (body-fat percentage)

Why it matters Reducing your body fat and improving lean muscle mass can help you run faster, burn more calories (even when you're not running) and improve your overall health. By the same token, not enough fat can lead to injury and other health complications. For men, the ideal body fat is 8-24%. For some athletes, it's going to be even lower. The most accurate measurements are by DEXA or Bod Pod scan, which are offered at some hospitals, research centres, doctors' surgeries, gyms and universities. You might have to pay for it. Other methods are easier and more accessible, but they're less accurate. Special scales offered at some gyms offer a body-fat measurement based on bioelectrical impedance analysis.

When to measure At the start of your workout or weight-loss efforts. At a gym, a personal trainer can use calipers to measure skinfold thickness in the chest, belly, triceps and thighs. These can be accurate if the trainer has experience, uses high-quality equipment and

chocolate. Studies have shown that people significantly underestimate the number of calories any food contains*. And the more calories a food contains, the more drastically they tend to underestimate those calories.

When to measure At first, try keeping a food log and tracking your calories for a week to get a sense of how many you're consuming. There are lots of free calorie-tracking websites and apps on the market. This may be an eye-opener, and give you some clue about what your weight-loss obstacles are.

How often Daily.

What they leave out Not all calories are created equal. Just counting how many calories you're taking in doesn't take into consideration the nutrition they provide, not to mention the difficulty in accurately measuring how many you require. Some calories – say, those from sugar and processed foods – can rev up your appetite and set you up to hit the wall in your races and afternoon staff meetings. Other calories – those from wholegrains, fruit and veg – offer a variety of nutrients and minerals, keep your blood sugar steady, and help you feel full and satisfied until your next meal. The volume of calories you're consuming also says nothing about the quality of your workouts, your body composition or your risk of chronic diseases.

Your healthy habits

Why they matter Each person has their own unique collection of practices that keep them on track and happy with their progress every day. Scientists often call these "process goals". They're the steps in the process that help you achieve the results you're seeking. If you watch them accumulate, they'll keep you honest. If you don't see your weight or pace changing, you can examine these habits and see where you've been diligent or lax. By the same token, you can draw confidence from all the healthy habits you're practising on

a regular basis. Here are some examples: keeping a journal each day may help you eliminate the stress that drives you to eat less healthy foods; keeping track of the water you drink might help you stay hydrated and improve how you feel on your runs; if night-time eating is a problem, you might build your confidence by noting how many times over a week you manage *not* to pile on the extra portion of dinner you planned to keep for tomorrow's lunch.

When to measure As soon as possible.

How often As often as possible.

What they leave out Your healthy habits might not match up with how you feel about the numbers on the scales or the finish-line clock, but they will pay off in the long run. And if the other numbers aren't reflecting success, you can always draw confidence from seeing how long and how well you've reversed unhealthy habits. If you stick with healthy process goals, eventually your weight and your race times *will* cooperate.



THE TAKEAWAY

Find a good mix

Use criteria you can measure on a daily, weekly and more long-term basis, and that are also affordable and easy to access. And think beyond the numbers. Remember, your overall health and happiness matter more than anything. If, say, your heart, love life or job is breaking down, your running and weight-loss goals won't mean much.

Give it four weeks

As running guru George Sheehan once said, you're an experiment of one. Try this mix for at least four weeks to see if it works for you. If, after that, you feel you're not getting the results you want, make some changes.

Make it personal

Regardless of the science, or our advice, only *you* can decide what matters most to you.

Getting started

If you're new to running, getting started can be daunting, and you will have questions – lots of them. One of the best ways to get answers is by talking to other, more experienced runners. They'll be excited to see you taking up the sport, and there's a very good chance you'll walk away with both the information you need and the first taste of the camaraderie you can expect if you stick with it.

However, assuming you don't live in a high-altitude training camp in the Rift Valley, there may be times when there's no experienced runner on hand to answer your queries. Don't worry: you'll find time-tested answers from a panel of experts on training right here.

"I'm not a runner yet... What's so great about running, anyway?"

Actually, you already are a runner. You probably ran around the playground when you were a kid. Humans are built to do it. Indeed, our bodies, with their long legs and lack of fur, are *designed* for running. The good news is that it doesn't require a lot of expensive equipment to get into it, and it beats other activities when it comes to not just losing weight, but also fending off disease. Want some specifics? Since 1991, the National Runners' and Walkers' Study at Lawrence Berkeley



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It's rare to find a runner who doesn't want to talk about running. Everyone has a friend or colleague who never misses a chance to discuss their latest race, or the bells and whistles on their fancy new GPS watch. If you're just taking your first strides in running you may not find this chat all that riveting. But you should put on your best "interested" expression and pay attention, because for a new runner, the knowledge and experience of the run geek is a very valuable resource.

National Laboratory in California has followed more than 154,000 runners and walkers. It has found that running as little as three to seven miles per week reduces your risk of stroke, heart disease, diabetes and high cholesterol. As a rule, the more you run, the more your risks decrease. The study found that running also offers the following benefits...

Promotes joint and bone health

Contrary to popular belief, running might prevent osteoarthritis and the need for joint replacements, with the body responding to the impact of our footfalls by thickening cartilage and building bone-mineral density. Those who averaged more than 1.2 miles per day of running were found to be at 18% less risk of osteoarthritis and 35% less risk of needing a hip replacement than non-runners.