

London Marathon race guide

Make use of the marathon expo

The London Marathon Expo is a great experience and my advice is to make the most of it. So take some time, go in the morning if you can, and avoid Saturday if possible as it gets very busy. If you live outside London and planning to stay with family or friends you may have limited choice about when you go along. Either way it is worth taking a few hours to walk round the stands selling the latest kit and equipment, as well as soaking up the general buzz and atmosphere.

The pasta buffet area is probably just about worth the price charged and the area has a stage where guest speakers give advice and guidance about the course and other aspects of the day.

Check your travel plans

It is a good idea to plan your journey to the start line and also back home or to the hotel afterwards, including trains and bus times. The marathon magazine usefully has all the train times. Know which one you will catch and from where.

Sorting out all this practical stuff well in advance is time well spent. You don't want to have any unnecessary stress or worry on the day. Arrive at the start about 90 minutes before the gun goes off and make sure that you're at the right place and that you know where your start pen is. It is a good idea to queue for the loos straight away as you may need to go more than once!

Preparation, preparation, preparation

Get up at least 3-4 hours before the start. It is likely you will be nervous and have had an interrupted night of sleep. Though don't worry too much about lack of sleep on the Saturday night; a good night's rest on Friday will be more beneficial. Nerves the night before are normal and to be expected.

Get your kit ready on the Friday night, not Saturday. And if you have already been to the Marathon Expo to get your number, then attach this to your running top and also your timing chip to your trainers. I guarantee you will attach it and remove it three or four times anyway and better to go through this on Friday rather than Saturday!

You can go through your checklist of kit and caboodle again on Saturday night too.

It is also useful to arrange in advance where people will cheer you on, and where you will meet them afterwards.

Follow your familiar pre-race routine

But if you have yet to really find one, try to:

- Drink a pint of water as soon as you get up
- Eat a breakfast that you know works for you. Porridge is excellent
- Leave plenty of time for digestion. 3 hours is ideal and continue to sip water if you want to. Avoid drinking too much in the last 1.5 hours before the race to avoid having to go to the toilet too often
- If you cannot face eating breakfast, opt for a high-energy drink instead

Check your body before you leave the house

Sounds a bit daft, but here are some of the practical things you need to do before you leave the house/hotel in the morning:

- Visit the loo whether you want to or not
- Put blister patches on any parts of your feet that have suffered in the past
- Put plasters over your nipples if they're susceptible to chafing
- Apply Vaseline underneath your kit to areas that need it (tops of shoulders are important, as well as the more obvious areas!)
- Rub on sun tan cream if its needed

Check your kit

Before you leave the house or hotel:

- Check that you're wearing your race number and you have your ChampionChip secured to your shoe. You won't get a finish time without them
- Check that you've got your post-race bag with some clean clothes, your start-pen clothes, emergency phone money and your energy food for the race
- Write your splits on the back of your hand if you haven't already put them on your race number or pick up a wrist band at the Marathon Expo
- Put your post-race bag on the baggage bus at least 25 minutes before start time. There will be plenty of announcements to remind you of this

Save your energy

Unless you plan to run in under three hours, you don't need to bother with much more than a walk as a warm-up. Save your energy - you'll be forced to ease gently into your run anyway. If you do want to stretch, do so very gently.

And stay warm. Take a bin liner or an old long-sleeved T-shirt that you can discard just before the gun goes off.

Let the race come to you

Kenyan elite runners have a saying: 'Let the Race Come to You' - and they know a thing or two about running. Start the marathon slowly.

Very slowly.

The pace may feel uncomfortably slow at first, but this is a good thing. The excitement of the day and being surrounded by 1000s of other runners means the temptation to run too fast at the beginning is difficult to resist, but resist you must. Running slowly for the first couple of miles gets rid of any nerves and tension, and after that you can settle in to your race pace.

Focus on your goal

Remind yourself of your goal. If it's a time target, focus on the importance of controlled pacing. If you just want to prove that you can finish a marathon, you can be more relaxed. Focus purely on enjoying the moment. Remind yourself how lucky you are to be in good enough health to take part in the world's greatest race. During the race, focus - but on the moment, not on how many miles remain.

Think about your form, breathing and pace. This will build confidence and help you to remain relaxed. It's only natural for your mind to wander, but it's good to have this touchstone to return to.

Drink regularly during the race

One thing you won't be short of during the race is opportunities to take on fluids. The excellent race organisation of the London Marathon means there are plenty of regular water and Lucozade drinks stations.

- Drink regularly, and from early on in the race. Drink stations will provide water in small bottles every mile. If you have to walk a few paces to drink properly, then do so. By being properly hydrated you'll more than make up the time you lose. A fluid loss of more than two litres will start to seriously impair your performance, and you can sweat that much out in less than two hours
- Try and replace lost energy. Your body can only hold about 18 miles-worth of readily accessible energy in the form of stored glycogen. When that's gone, you'll be running on empty and you will hit the wall. If you've trained with Lucozade, there are stations every 5km. It's quite strong, so drink water, too
- If you don't like Lucozade, or have not trained with it, take some energy gels, jelly beans, or whatever works for you. Ideally, you should be replacing 150-300kcal of carbohydrates every hour after the first hour of running

Prepare yourself for a rollercoaster ride

Each runner's body reacts differently to running a marathon, but here is what yours might encounter come race day:

Miles 1-3

The gun fires and you are off at last. But nothing feels right - your legs are stiff and your heart rate is high. You feel as if your training has counted for nothing and you could not possibly run the full distance. Don't worry - it can take six miles or more for everything to settle down and for you to run the nerves out of your legs. Just think: you have been imagining this moment for so long, and with any excitement or anticipation, there is a bit of coming to terms with the occasion. Give your body time to adjust to the new experience. Take time to look around at the crowds. If talking helps, say some words of encouragement to fellow runners. And if your shoes feel uncomfortable, stop and refit them or re-tie your laces. A minute lost now could save you 15 miles of painful blistering later on. Set a target time for 6 miles, or a landmark such as Cutty Sark, and have a target time for when you want to reach there. This approach is far more relaxing than worrying about your split times after the first couple of miles.

Miles 4-9

By now things have started to settle down a bit. You have managed to get in a few miles at a steady race pace and you are feeling more relaxed. That's great. However, it is also possible you have run a number of these miles at very different paces and you are starting to panic that your target time is slipping away from you, or you have been running far too fast and got carried away.

If either is true, change your pace progressively over a couple of miles or so and find your rhythm.

Miles 10-13

You should now be getting into your stride. Your breathing will be rhythmical and chances are the times for each of your miles should be pretty similar (don't forget that taking on fluids can add a good few seconds to this time).

Also, you are heading towards the half-way point and the glory that is Tower Bridge. Savour this moment, the crowds and noise are spectacular, and you will remember it forever. It feels as if they are cheering for you, and you alone.

Miles 14-19

You have gone through half-way and what a feeling that will be. Just think to yourself, there will be fewer steps to the finish now than you have already taken. But on the other hand, you're tired. Your legs are heavy and achy and your shoulders are tense.

Remind yourself that this is normal, and focus on your running style by lifting forwards and upwards with your hips. Do this for 5-10 minutes and really focus on your form and technique. This can be a tough part of the race, not least because you are running away from the finish and crowds are thinner. But focus on the fact that the really best parts of the race are yet to come, and friends and family are at the finish line waiting for you.

Miles 20-25

For many of you, this will be uncharted territory. 20 miles may have been your maximum distance of your longest long run and you might start to question if completing the race is possible. If you feel really good there is a tendency to increase the pace, but try not to, there is still a quarter of the way to go. For this part of the race the crowds are superb, especially along Embankment and they will really help you. Stay focused and positive and maybe draw on those positive images and sounds you have used in your training.

Miles 25-26.2

At this point you really won't care how you feel, what your name is, or what the day of the week it is! Even at a slow walk the finish is no more than 20 minutes away and nothing, but nothing is going to stop you getting over the finish line. No matter how tired you feel, the mind is a powerful thing. You might be surprised that you can convince your body into believing that you're in the last mile of a 5k, and you will find that extra bit of speed as you round the corner at Buckingham Palace for that final sprint up the Mall.

Keep moving

Straight after the race:

- Try to keep moving and sip water or the sports drink given to you in the goody bag
- Get to the baggage buses as soon as possible to put on fresh clothes
- Eat some easily digestible carbohydrates, or have an energy drink if you can't face solids. Your body will kick-start its recovery better if you can start refuelling in the first 30-60 minutes. And don't skimp - your reserves are all but empty

In the first three hours:

- If you must stretch, do it very lightly – current research states that your muscles will be saturated with tiny tears, and are extra-susceptible to additional damage
- If you can bear it, sit in a cold bath for 10-15 minutes. It will reduce the inflammation and you won't be nearly so sore tomorrow. Try sitting in the

bath as you run the tap and wear a T-shirt for less of a shock to the system. Paula Radcliffe does it and enjoys a huge tub of ice cream at the same time

- Eat some more, and preferably some protein along with the carbs

Research shows that optimal recovery food is 70-75 per cent carbohydrate and 25-30 per cent protein, a tuna or chicken bagel or sandwich is very good. Eating little and often maintains higher blood glucose and insulin concentrations, which lets your muscles absorb more energy.

Above all else enjoy it

This is the single most important piece of advice anyone can give you. Race day is the chance to cash in all the training you have done. All that hard work, the blood, sweat and tears of the past few months. Those dark nights in the rain and cold lonely mornings out there on the streets, when the rest of the family was in bed. This is your day, the day you get to run with the best runners in the world, in the best marathon in the world and take part in a truly global event.

Think back to four months ago when running 5 miles seemed an effort!

Look at the fantastic progress you have made. Look at the runner you have become.

The final few miles of the marathon is an experience you will never forget. The size and noise of the crowds are spectacular. And as you cross that line and that medal is hung around your neck you will experience a beautiful cocktail of relief, exhaustion and exhilaration.

Believe me when I tell you, that feeling will have been worth every, single step.

Good luck and happy running.

Matthew