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Get Off the Roads

We all reach a point where running becomes a little monotonous. The dull “thud, thud, thud” of running shoes on endless stretches of pavement is so rhythmic it could put you to sleep, and even your playlist of songs from *Rocky* can’t pump you up. You’ve been increasing both your speed and your mileage for months now, but lately you’ve been feeling stuck. You’ve plateaued. Your legs feel heavy and it’s getting harder to hit the roads each day. Don’t worry though. There’s an easy solution, one that’s probably been staring you in the face the whole time. *Don’t* hit the roads. And I don’t mean hit the couch instead. Get in touch with nature and do some trail running.

I don’t know how many times I’ve driven to a nearby park with lots of extensive, interesting trails and seen people trudging by on the road, dejectedly staring down for miles and miles at lackluster black concrete with two plain yellow stripes down the middle. They’re running right past the perfect place to up their inspiration.

Trail running reminds you what it is to be human. This is what we were created for—not to sit in temperature controlled offices or run desolate miles on man-made materials. We are intended to be a part of nature, free among the trees and the wildlife. Trails, with their twists and turns through forested areas and nearby (or sometimes even crossing) streams, show us that we are part of an earth that has incredible natural processes. Trails remind us that nature is really in control and we are just getting in the way with our buildings, roads, and modern ideas. They help keep us sane and offer an invigorating refresher in the ways of our plant and animal counterparts. That’s why even big cities have parks. We all need a little bit of nature in our lives to make us feel refreshed and rejuvenated.

Mix it Up

Even better, running on trails is a great way to improve your fitness level. Running on trails works your body differently than road running, so just by mixing it up you're practically guaranteed to get in better overall condition. While you'll be a little bit slower on trails, you'll be building endurance and leg strength as well as coordination as you avoid stray rocks and tree roots. While running on roads is linear, the uneven terrain and sharper turns on trails moves your body side-to-side, which relies on your hips and ankles more. Plus, trails are softer than the roads, so you'll get a lower impact workout.

Trail running can be more difficult than running on roads or the treadmill in a lot of ways. The ground is rarely completely flat, so it is much more difficult to maintain an even stride and perfect form. Paths are often twisty and hill-ridden so runners must be in good overall fitness to combat new challenges. Furthermore, there are tree branches to avoid and squirrels that may run unexpectedly across your path, so constant vigilance is important for your safety and injury prevention.

Conquer the Hill Monster

Many woodsy trails are rife with hills, which can make for an intense workout as well as an invigorating feeling. Hills on trails can be much steeper than hills on the roads, and they look really intimidating. The best method for tackling hills is to shorten your stride, quicken your pace, and just go for it, planting your toes firmly. There's something cathartic about standing at the top of a hill you've just conquered and looking around at everything below you, especially when you're surrounded by nature.

Going back downhill, it can be tempting to let yourself lose control and run at breakneck speed with your arms out to your sides, just like you did when you were a little kid. So do it (running is all about the fun, remember?). But only once, just to get the urge out of your system. It's important to have control over your body so you don't end up flipping over yourself and rolling down the hill in a mass of sprains and pulled ligaments. Run downhill on the balls of your feet for the greatest combination of control and speed. If you can hear your footsteps and it sounds like a stampede, rein yourself in.

You Too, City Residents

You don't need mountain passes and deep woods to run trails. Even city dwellers can find some trails without traveling too far. Find a quiet city park to traverse, or find out where your local high school or college cross country team practices and races. If you live near old, unused railroad tracks, they often provide a smooth, easy path to follow. When the wooden slats rot away from the middle, you're left with two steel guidelines and comfortable terrain.

Safety Monitor Says Watch Your Step

Different types of terrain cause different concerns for your footing. Mud will stick to your shoes and make your feet heavy. If the ground is wet, you might also have to deal with large puddles. Try to avoid them if you can, but without altering your path too much. If you have to go through, keep your steps high and quick to avoid completely soaking your feet.

Sand can cause a lot of slipping and it makes for slow, tedious running. If you're running a sandy trail, stick to the outer edges where the sand is likely to be thinner and more packed down. If you're running on a beach or shoreline, the closer to the water you are, the better.

Gravel paths are generally pretty even, but the ground isn't solid and if you slip and fall, you're likely to get scraped up. Avoid the larger rocks and make sure you clean the pebbles out of the soles of your shoes when you're done.

Wooded trails often have prominent tree roots and paths overgrown by low bushes. A layer of leaves on the ground can be slippery and will conceal roots and rocks below.

Packed dirt is the easiest type of terrain to traverse, and most races will be on packed dirt trails. They are the most similar to roads, but the footing is still uneven and you'll have more hills to contend with.

Be Careful and You Won't Get Hurt – Or Lost

As with all runs, it's important to be cautious when running the trails, but safety is particularly important when you're isolated in wooded or uninhabited areas. Try to run with a partner or with a group. If you must or prefer to run alone, tell your spouse or roommate exactly where you're going and when you plan to return. Pay attention to the news and keep in mind which areas near you are the safest. Women in particular should carry pepper spray, and everyone should carry a cell phone and some form of identification.

Also, unless you're following a set, marked path, it can be easy to get lost on series of twisting, intertwining trails. If there are lightweight maps of the areas, carry one with you. Otherwise, set a pattern for yourself. Go in alternating directions at every fork, or two lefts, then two rights. That way, if you decide to turn around, it's easy to reverse your directions to find your way back to where you started.

Trails don't necessarily have to replace road runs, especially if you're racing on the roads, and the track is still the best place for speed workouts. However, if you want to race on trails, you should incorporate trail running into your workouts at least twice a week. It'll make your running more interesting and put you in much better condition.