5 Get-Lean Tips for Runners

When it comes to weight management, we tend to focus on the health-related benefits of being lighter, like cholesterol and blood pressure readings, as well as aesthetics. For runners, however, shedding excess pounds may also increase performance gains. There's no denying the fact that you will likely run faster when you're at your ideal racing weight instead of over or under it.

For most of us, the issue is shedding pounds. As you probably guessed, it's easier to run faster when you're lugging around less body mass. In addition to losing fat, gaining some muscle will contribute to that lean look most runners want. Remember, it's not just about getting skinny, but rather about being strong.

To calculate your current body mass index, plug in your height and weight into this BMI calculator. This will give you a good jumping-off point to figure out approximately how much you have to lose to be in the "healthy" weight range. Once you've pinpointed a goal, here are five things you can do to shed pounds and get stronger for improved running performances.

1. Consult an expert.

Making an appointment with a sports nutritionist can be a great way to kick off weight loss. Since you're looking to get lean, an expert in the field will be able to assist in tailoring your diet to fit your specific needs. He or she can help factor in your daily caloric needs based on how much running you're doing so you avoid cutting calories to the point of hurting your performance. A sports nutritionist can also do metabolic tests, which will provide additional health data to inform your get-lean quest.

2. Eat more often.

Research has demonstrated that people who eat six or more small meals during the day tend to have lower BMI's than those who eat three larger meals a day. What's more, a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that nibbling more effectively keeps the metabolism steady throughout the day versus gorging on three large meals. The key is to identify smaller nutrient-rich meals that are satisfying and keep you fueled for workouts. Taking in protein and fiber-rich fruits and vegetables will go a long way in ensuring satiety.

3. Incorporate strength training.

While studies have shown that aerobic training is best for shedding fat, resistance training is tops at building lean muscle. Assuming you're already running regularly, adding in 2–3 days of strength training can help you reach that ideal racing weight. Perhaps even better: Resistance training has been shown to increase running economy, which means you'll use fuel more efficiently during workouts and races. More efficient running workouts translate into increased fitness.

4. Add in high-intensity intervals.

While we often get preoccupied with the idea of linking aerobic training and fat burning, more recent weight-loss studies have begun to focus on high-intensity interval training. In fact, in comparing runners who did four to six 30-second treadmill sprints three times per week with runners who did 30–60 minutes of steady-state running three days a week, Canadian researchers discovered that the former lost more fat after six weeks. While about 80% of your training should be easier steady-state aerobic training, if you're looking to achieve a leaner physique, don't forget to add in one or two harder sessions each week.

5. Track.

Tracking your consumption on MyFitnessPal and your exercise on MapMyFitness can help you determine whether you're taking in the right number and kinds of calories for your activity level. Since research has shown that we often overestimate the number of calories we burn during workouts, this can be particularly important. What's more, it can help you assess the quality of your diet. If you're taking in the right number of calories, but they're all from less-nutritious sources, you're going to have trouble fueling your workouts optimally.