

WINTER RUNNING: SAFETY AND COMFORT

Slippery surfaces include ice, snow, snow-on-ice, and “black” (invisible) ice. Running safely on those surfaces calls for a combination of awareness, technique, and appropriate foot gear.

Awareness is most important of all. It is easy to be distracted by a conversation, the music player, or sights and sounds. Paying attention to the running surface as it changes is critical under winter conditions. Note changes in grade (uphill, downhill, slanted sideways) and adjust accordingly. Run off the side of the road or trail in the grass when the main route is too slick.

Technique entails shortening the stride and slowing down (even to a walk), keeping the weight centered over the foot. The current running-form emphasis, landing on the mid-foot (instead of on the heel) is even more important on ice than under dry conditions.

Foot gear for slippery conditions uses various approaches to increasing traction.

Some traction devices pull on over your running shoes (metal coils are better on snow, spikes are better on ice, and some designs have a mix of both). Some running shoes have built-in spikes. Many runners use the time-tested approach of screwing sheet metal screws into the soles of an old pair of running shoes (Google “screw shoes” for a variety of articles and demonstrations on how to make a pair of your own).

Cold is the second winter challenge: It is easy to be over-dressed for vigorous exercise. Within the first mile or so, it is often necessary to peel a layer and wrap it around your waist. Zip-front upper body clothing is very helpful for temperature control. Legs and feet tend to tolerate a range of temperatures better than chest, arms, ears, and hands. Over time, you will develop patterns of dressing for the cold that work for your unique needs. In the meantime, consider the following layers, organized by body part.

Head

- Brimmed hat (for rain/snow, especially if you wear glasses)
- Earmuffs (such as “Earbags” brand, find them online)
- Warm fleece or knit hat (washable...it will get sweaty)
- Warm headband (good if your head tends to overheat in a hat)
- Face mask (such as a “Buff” multi-purpose stretchy, breathable, neck-face-head warmer)

Upper body

- Women’s underwear (support and wicking prevent soggianness and chafing)
- Base layer (zip-turtleneck in a high-quality wicking fabric for comfort against the skin)
- Mid layer(s): fleece vest, lightweight fleece jacket
- Outer layer for windy, wet weather: lightweight, wind/water resistant (hooded helps)

Hands

- Lightweight gloves for medium temperatures
- Mittens are warmer than gloves, can be worn over thin gloves
- Handwarmers (chemical) when very cold and/or windy
- Wind-blocking fabric can be helpful.

Lower body

- Men emphasize the need for windproof pants or underwear.
- Long undies not usually necessary, except with very lightweight and/or loose pants
- Running tights come in different fits and weights. It takes some experimenting to find your personal preference between those that fit loosely and those that hug the body.

Feet

- Wicking socks keep feet dry & prevent blisters (merino wool is especially warm)
- Winter running shoes (insulated, gore-tex) are available
- Traction devices pull on over shoes for stability on slippery surfaces.

Darkness is a third seasonal issue (especially “up north”): When the sun rises after 8 and sets by 5, some of our runs will likely take place in the dark. The challenge is threefold: To SEE, BE SEEN and AVOID UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTERS.

Seeing in the dark begins with choosing well-lighted sidewalks and trails. Headlamps add an increment of additional clarity to the view. Look for one that provides a wide beam to illuminate the path ahead. It also helps to run with buddies, providing more eyes to be on the lookout for obstacles, traffic, and slippery patches.

Being seen is enhanced by wearing a headlamp. Reflective vests and clothing, red tail-lights, and “knuckle lights” add to the Christmas-tree effect and help motorists and cyclists steer clear. Finally, running as part of a group (all lighted up) makes it even easier to be seen,

Unpleasant human or wild animal encounters are more common in the dark. The best insurance against these hazards is to run with a buddy or in a group.

Consider alternatives

Treadmills and indoor tracks offer viable options in winter, especially when conditions are extreme and/or when it is dark and no buddy or group is available to add a margin of safety.