Pace & Pavement

Couch to 5K: the 9-week run/walk plan

The NHS Couch to 5K schedule, week by week, with a tip for each week and the gear each stage actually asks for.

paceandpavement.com/couch-to-5k/couch-to-5k-plan - free to print and share

How every session works

Frequency: 3 runs a week, with a rest day between each.

Start every session with: a 5-minute brisk warm-up walk.

Finish every session with: a 5-minute cool-down walk.

Every session in the NHS plan opens with a 5-minute brisk walk and closes with a 5-minute walk, with stretches before and after. The session totals below are the NHS figures, which exclude the stretching.

The nine weeks at a glance

WEEK	THE RUNS THIS WEEK	LONGEST RUN	SESSION TOTAL
1	Eight 1-minute runs, separated by 90-second walks	1 min	28 min 30 s
2	Six 90-second runs, separated by 2-minute walks	1 min 30 s	29 min
3	Two 90-second runs and two 3-minute runs	3 min	25 min
4	Two 3-minute runs and two 5-minute runs	5 min	31 min 30 s
5	5- and 8-minute runs, then a 20-minute run with no walk breaks	20 min	30 to 31 min
6	5-, 8- and 10-minute runs, then a 25-minute run with no walk breaks	25 min	33 to 35 min
7	A 25-minute run, all three sessions	25 min	35 min
8	A 28-minute run, all three sessions	28 min	38 min
9	A 30-minute run, all three sessions	30 min	40 min

Every session, in order

Tick the box as you finish each run. Every session has a 5-minute walk at each end.

Week 1 - 1-minute runs

- ☐ Run 1 (28 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min, walk 1 min 30 s - repeat 7 times - then a final 1 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- ☐ Run 2 (28 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min, walk 1 min 30 s - repeat 7 times - then a final 1 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- ☐ Run 3 (28 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min, walk 1 min 30 s - repeat 7 times - then a final 1 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Keep your head up, your back straight and your shoulders relaxed, and take small sips of water if it is warm.

Ours: This is a walking week with running in it, so judge a shoe on how it feels at walking pace too. If your only pair is a gym or court shoe, week 1 is the week to find that out.

Week 2 - 90-second runs

- [ ] Run 1 (29 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 2 min - repeat 5 times - then a final 1 min 30 s run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (29 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 2 min - repeat 5 times - then a final 1 min 30 s run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (29 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 2 min - repeat 5 times - then a final 1 min 30 s run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Focus on time rather than speed, and keep a steady, comfortable breathing pattern.

Ours: Rubbing shows up around here. Check your socks and the seams on whatever you are wearing before you buy anything else.

Week 3 - First 3-minute runs

- [ ] Run 1 (25 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 1 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 3 min - repeat once - finishing on the 3 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (25 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 1 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 3 min - repeat once - finishing on the 3 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (25 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 1 min 30 s, walk 1 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 3 min - repeat once - finishing on the 3 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: If you are not using the app, bring a watch, stopwatch or phone timer so you can track the intervals.

Ours: The shortest week on the plan at 25 minutes. A good week to work out how you want to carry your phone, because the intervals now need timing.

Week 4 - First 5-minute runs

- [ ] Run 1 (31 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, run 5 min, walk 2 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, final 5 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (31 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, run 5 min, walk 2 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, final 5 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (31 min 30 s) - 5-min walk, then: Run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, run 5 min, walk 2 min 30 s, run 3 min, walk 1 min 30 s, final 5 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Take the rest days between runs, and try matching your breath to your steps: inhale for 3 steps, then exhale for 2.

Ours: Sixteen minutes of running in a session is where a shoe that is half a size too small starts to tell you about it. Fit now rather than later.

Week 5 - Ends with a 20-minute run

- [ ] Run 1 (31 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 5 min, walk 3 min, run 5 min, walk 3 min, final 5 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (31 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 8 min, walk 5 min, final 8 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (30 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 20 min run, no walking breaks. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Warm up properly to help prevent injury, music or a podcast may help on the 20-minute run, and it is fine to repeat a run or a week.

Ours: The three runs this week are genuinely different, so read the row before you head out. If headphones are joining you for the 20-minute run, pick a pair you can still hear traffic through.

Week 6 - Ends with a 25-minute run

- [ ] Run 1 (34 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 5 min, walk 3 min, run 8 min, walk 3 min, final 5 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (33 min) - 5-min walk, then: Run 10 min, walk 3 min, final 10 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (35 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 25 min run, no walking breaks. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Focus on your breathing and your rhythm as you go back to run-walk intervals.

Ours: Going back to intervals after a 20-minute run is not a step backwards. Sessions are now over half an hour, so a warm day is worth a few sips of water.

Week 7 - 25 minutes, every run

- [ ] Run 1 (35 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 25 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (35 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 25 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (35 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 25 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: If it is hot, run in the morning when it is cooler, running with a friend can help your motivation, stay hydrated, and repeat the week if you do not feel ready.

Ours: Three continuous runs in one week is the biggest jump in the plan. If anything aches, repeating week 7 costs you seven days and nothing else.

Week 8 - 28 minutes, every run

- [ ] Run 1 (38 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 28 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (38 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 28 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (38 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 28 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Try a new route or some motivating audio to keep boredom away, and take your rest days.

Ours: A new route is also a new surface. If yours is unlit, this is the week a reflective layer or a small light earns its place.

Week 9 - 30 minutes, every run

- [ ] Run 1 (40 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 30 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 2 (40 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 30 min run. 5-min walk to finish.
- [ ] Run 3 (40 min) - 5-min walk, then: One continuous 30 min run. 5-min walk to finish.

NHS tip: Stay hydrated before, during and after each run.

Ours: Forty minutes on your feet, three times a week. Whatever you started in has now done about nine hours of work, which is a fair basis for judging whether it suits you.

Gear you actually need

The first four items are the NHS kit list. The rest are optional, listed with the week they usually start to matter. The links are our own guides, not shop links.

WHAT	WHEN	WHY, AND WHERE TO READ MORE
Running shoes that support your feet	Week 1	The NHS kit list names them, and they are the one item worth spending on. One comfortable, plate-free road trainer covers all 27 sessions. paceandpavement.com/couch-to-5k/best-running-shoes-for-beginners
Comfortable clothes you can move in	Week 1	The NHS wording is "wear whatever feels comfortable to move in". You do not need a running wardrobe to start. paceandpavement.com/10k/what-to-wear-for-a-5k-or-10k
A supportive bra, if you need one	Week 1	On the NHS list. Fit is personal, so it is worth trying on rather than ordering blind. paceandpavement.com/couch-to-5k/best-running-shoes-for-beginners-women
A way to carry your phone	Weeks 1 to 3	The NHS suggests a running armband if you have no pocket. Your phone is the coach if you follow the plan in the app. paceandpavement.com/running-gear/how-to-carry-phone-while-running
Something to time the intervals	Week 3	The NHS says a watch, stopwatch or phone timer is enough. The app times everything for you, so a GPS watch is a want, not a need. paceandpavement.com/running-gear/best-running-watch-for-beginners
Running socks	Weeks 2 to 4	Not on the NHS list, and you can start in what you own. Seamless-toe running socks are the cheapest fix for anything that rubs. paceandpavement.com/running-gear/best-running-socks
Water for warm days	Weeks 6 to 9	The NHS plan suggests small sips when it is warm and staying hydrated around the week 9 runs. A small bottle in your hand or a belt does it. paceandpavement.com/running-gear/how-to-carry-water-while-running
A light or reflective layer	Week 8	Only if your runs start before sunrise or end after dark. The NHS advises reflective clothing and well-lit routes in low light. paceandpavement.com/running-gear/best-running-headlamp

What to skip until week 9 is done

- Carbon-plated or racing shoes - there is not a single fast session in the plan
- A second pair of shoes - one pair covers all 27 sessions
- A hydration vest - your longest run is 30 minutes
- An expensive multisport watch - the app already times the intervals

Source for the schedule and the weekly tips: NHS Better Health: Couch to 5K running plan - https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active/get-running-with-couch-to-5k/couch-to-5k-running-plan/

This plan is general information, not medical advice. The NHS suggests speaking to a GP first if you have any health concerns, and says it is fine to repeat a run or a whole week.

Pace & Pavement - paceandpavement.com/couch-to-5k/couch-to-5k-plan - published by Iron Mako Media.