

5 Elements of Chi Running



As told to Kristin Harrison •

Most of us are never taught how to run; we just do it. So why is running technique important?

The biggest reason why you should pay attention to running form and technique is a simple one: so you can be a runner for many more years. I've been a runner or 35 years and have completed 40 ultra marathons. Focusing on my running technique is what has allowed me to keep going for so many years.

If you run in a way that hurts your body, you won't be able to keep running very long. Focusing on form and technique can help you stay injury-free. Also, improving your form can help you become a more efficient runner, which allows you to go farther and faster with less effort.



So what is ChiRunning and how does it improve running efficiency?

In ultra running, efficiency is the name of the game. I experimented with my form for years to try and find the most efficient way to run to become more competitive. A light bulb went off when I took a tai chi class in 1997, and I learned to move from my body's core and let my arms and legs follow. Tai chi is all about learning to relax your body's moving parts to be efficient. When I applied these concepts to a run, I was completely blown away by the difference.

In 2004, I wrote a book about what I'd discovered and it explains the technique I use. ChiRunning is designed to address the two vital reasons for focusing on form: injury prevention and energy efficiency. It works because it reduces the impact on your joints and allows your leg muscles to work less when you run.

The Basics of Chi Running

ChiRunning focuses on posture, leg swing, the position of the pelvis and a forward lean. It's not a fluffy, hippie theory--it's based on the physics of body mechanics. Here are the basics:

Run Tall. Think about this: When you're standing straight, your joints are in alignment and your skeleton is supporting your weight. When you run, you want to keep this alignment so your skeleton continues to be involved.

It's common, however, for runners to slump the shoulders or bend at the waist, which then requires the leg muscles to support most of the body weight, instead of the stronger skeleton. By maintaining good posture, you lessen the amount of work your legs have to do and move more efficiently.

Lean Forward. One of the biggest forces we have to fight every day is gravity. Why not make it work for us instead of against us? By adding a slight forward lean when you run, your body falls forward and you use gravity for your propulsion instead of your legs. This lean also helps keep your body in alignment, with your foot landing under you.

To do this, lean from your ankles, not your waist, and keep your spine straight. The lean is subtle; don't lean so far forward you are out of control or actually falling.

Land on the Mid-Foot. To keep your posture in alignment--which helps reduce injuries--while you're leaning forward, land with a mid-foot strike when you run. You want your foot to land underneath or slightly behind you, in line with your hips and shoulders.

Run from Your Core. Many women I work with suffer from hip problems while running. Often this is caused by weak core muscles, which aren't strong enough to keep the hips and pelvis aligned. To reduce injuries, it's vital to keep your pelvis level. You do this by engaging your core muscles while you run.

To level your pelvis, try this simple exercise: Stand against the wall and try to press your lower back into the wall. Watch what happens to your pelvis. You have to engage your lower abdominal muscles in a vertical crunch movement. Remember that feeling in your body and try to maintain it as you run.

Relax, Relax, Relax. It's common for runners to tighten up their shoulders or other muscles as they get tired. But all that stiffness and tension wastes energy and makes you less efficient. When you feel your technique slipping, ask yourself: Where am I tense, and what can I do about it?

Sense and respond with the correct adjustments, which might be as simple as straightening your arms and shaking them out or reminding yourself to lower your shoulders. In my book, I recommend a series of pre-run body looseners--such as shaking out your arms and legs, ankle rolls and hip and pelvis circles--to help your muscles learn to stay relaxed when you are running and throughout the day.

How hard is it to change your running technique?

Some coaches say you can't change your running form, but I don't believe that for a second. But it does take time to break inefficient habits. So, you'll need to slow down your pace at first to focus on the basics. Practice makes perfect. The more you practice, the quicker you'll learn it. For the average person, it takes one to three months for his or her muscles to learn something new.

Devote at least one run a week to technique. Don't listen to music or talk to a friend; instead, think about your body position and alignment and make adjustments throughout your run to stay relaxed and move efficiently.

Learning ChiRunning is like learning to ride a bike--once you get it, your muscles remember the movement, and it becomes intuitive. You'll feel a difference in your body once you get it. Many women have told me they suffer less hip, back and knee pain once they switch to this technique, in addition to increasing their endurance and speed. Hopefully, you'll be able to run for years to come.

Danny Dreyer is a running coach and author of ChiRunning: A Revolutionary Approach to Effortless, Injury-Free Running. For a schedule of ChiRunning workshops or more info, visit chirunning.com.