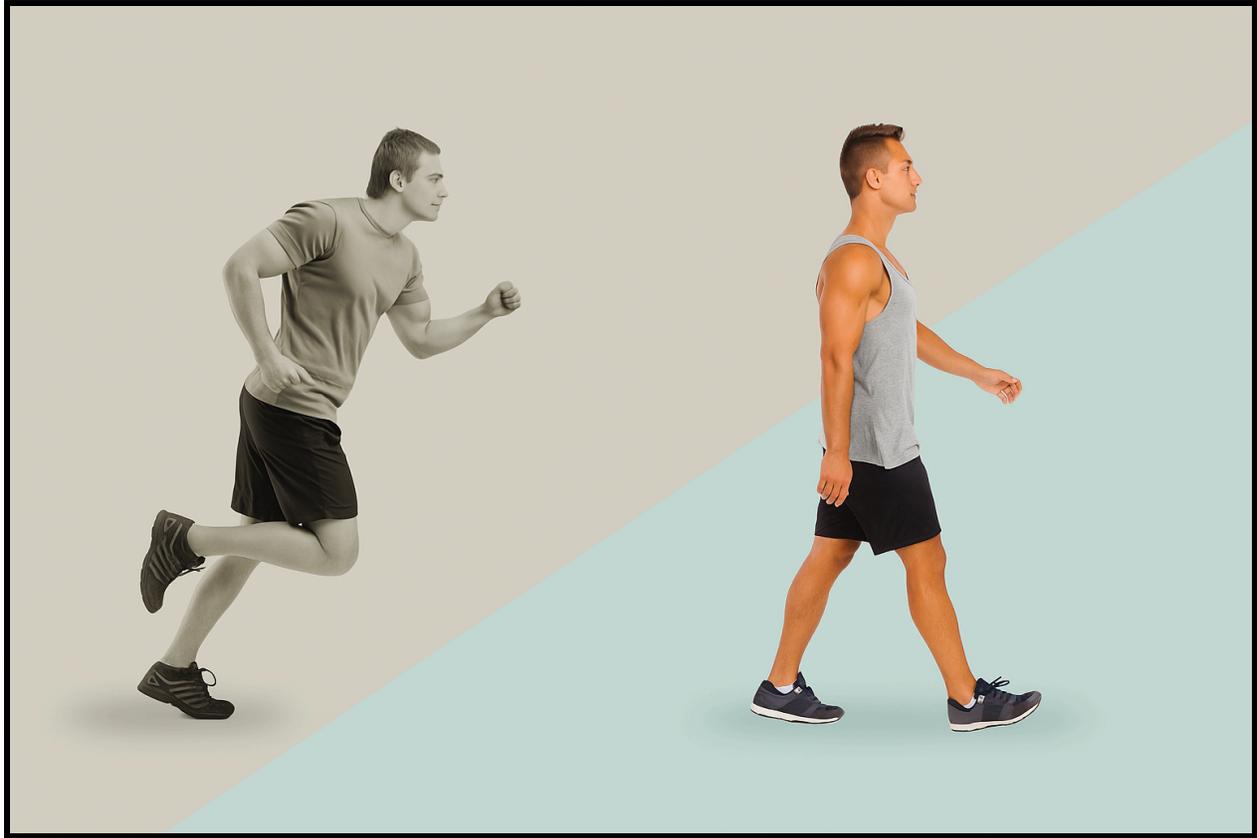




Born to Walk: Rethinking the Running Boom



The running boom has inspired generations of endurance athletes. But is running long distances optimal for our health?

Distance running has taken off over the last few decades. You've probably laced up your running shoes to go for a nice jog around the neighborhood. Maybe you're an endurance athlete who runs marathons or does Iron Man competitions. While these are impressive competitions to be a part of, it's not a good thing to be doing chronic cardio.

Long bouts of intensive exercise — like running — release a stress hormone called cortisol. Brief cortisol release is a healthy response to exercise. The problem arises when cortisol is chronically elevated. Pounding the pavement

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4-6 miles for 5-6 days a week will cause chronically elevated cortisol levels. This leads to systemic inflammation, which damages tissue and impairs recovery. Elevated cortisol also accelerates muscle protein breakdown. Endurance running is also a catabolic sport. Prolonged cardio demands more energy. Once glucose is depleted, the body will start to use muscle as fuel. All of these things result in less muscle mass, slower metabolism, and a frailer physique over time.

Chronic cardio also weakens the immune system. When cortisol and adrenaline levels are elevated for extensive periods of time, it suppresses the activity of white blood cells. Immunity dips for 3-72 hours after an intense endurance effort. Endurance athletes who overtrain are more susceptible to colds, respiratory tract infections, and are slower to recover from illness.

Endurance athletes also have an increased risk of cardiovascular disease. Myocardial fibrosis, atrial fibrillation, and arterial stiffening are some of the health issues that obsessive endurance athletes might encounter.

The solution to this running craze is a return to walking. Low-level aerobic exercise like walking utilizes fat as fuel. Your body has plenty of oxygen and time to use fat stores as energy when you're walking. The same can't be said for running, which predominantly uses glucose as fuel. Walking is between 55-77% of maximum heart rate, and it's a sustainable activity that has an incredibly low risk of injury when compared to running. This isn't to say that running is bad, but the benefits of walking are significant when compared to running. If you want to improve your body composition and overall health, you may want to rethink those new running shoes.

Opinion: We were born to walk and (occasionally) sprint.