Track versus treadmill [1]

Dear Alice,

Why is it I can always run a greater distance on a track than I can on a treadmill? On a track, I can run five or six miles, but on a treadmill, I can only go a maximum of three or four, then I tucker out. Is it because I get more bored on a treadmill, or is there a more physical explanation?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Great job getting your heart pumping! Even when you’re not running as many miles as you’d like, getting regular aerobic activity has a number of benefits, so keep it up! To your question, it turns out that there may actually be some difference in how much energy your body expends when running on a track versus a treadmill. It’s not clear whether you typically run on an outdoor track, but if you do, there are few factors that can lead you to exert a bit more energy running outside than if you ran on a treadmill. You bring up a good point, Reader — how you feel during a run involves both your body and mind (read on for more information). In fact, there may be a psychological reason behind feeling tired after fewer miles on a treadmill. That being the case, there are still ways to increase your enjoyment when hitting the ‘mill, which could translate to clocking in a couple more miles!

To help illustrate the difference in the amount of energy your body expends under these given conditions, first try to picture running outside on a track. Your feet push against the hard ground to move you forward; perhaps the surface is a little uneven. There’s probably some wind. It may be a little chilly or even rainy; or maybe it’s sunny and hot. You may change your pace from one minute to another, consciously or not. Now consider your typical run on a treadmill. Environmental factors — such as wind, temperature, and uneven surface — are most likely stable since you’re indoors. Plus, the treadmill belt offers some assistance in pulling your feet back underneath your body, leading you to exert less energy to move your feet and legs. It’s also possible that having a programmed, unchanging pace on the treadmill may alter your experience. Although these differences may seem subtle, they can lead your body to exert less energy than if you ran outdoors.

Though running on a treadmill may be easier on your body, the psychological benefits of running...
outside may be contributing to your increased mileage out in the great wide open. Psychological cues from running outside, such as feeling wind against your face or gaining motivation from running with or around other people, may help you feel like you’re making progress. In addition, these cues can distract you from focusing on speed or unpleasant aspects of running, such as fatigue or pain. On a treadmill, without distractions or motivators, you may be more likely to focus on some of these unpleasant aspects of running, which could lead you to feel tired more quickly.

Does this mean you’re stuck feeling bored or unexcited about hitting the treadmill? Not necessarily — there are ways to make the experience more enjoyable and, in turn, can help crank up your mileage and overall performance. The next time you run on a treadmill, if possible, you might consider positioning yourself in front of a television — this can help make a long workout feel much shorter. Listening to your favorite music is another great way to improve your mood, increase endurance, and even promote your body to spend energy efficiently. Last but not least, diet [2], sleep [3], and hydration can also contribute to how you feel on a run — a well-run body needs proper care!

Since track and treadmill running both offer many of the same benefits, finding out what works best for your activity routine can lead to a more enjoyable experience. Another factor you may want to consider is that running on a treadmill provides a softer surface, making it a little easier on your joints. People with knee pain or soreness might opt for a treadmill instead of the road outside for this reason. If you’re a seasoned runner and have a fairly consistent, healthy lifestyle, it may be that your enthusiasm for running on a track is fueled by how much you enjoy being outside. For even more on proper care and maintenance of a body in motion, check out some additional Q&As in the Fitness [4] category of the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [5] archives.

Alice!
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Nutrition & Physical Activity [6]
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