

THE TIMES

Can running marathons really make you fat?

Peta Bee

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If you are running long distance to lose weight, forget it, says Peta Bee. The training alone won't make you become thin

On New Year's Day I started training for the London Marathon and have since become your archetypal running bore, reeling off statistics about my state of body and mind to anyone who will listen. Come race day, April 17, I will have run for 107 consecutive days, totting up an average 45 miles a week and regularly clocking 15 miles or more in a single hit.

The more running I've been doing, the more virtuous my lifestyle has become. My alcohol intake has been negligible because I am too exhausted to socialise and I have given up croissants and cakes. Yet, despite the monumental physical effort and the accompanying dietary straitjacket that it entails, I have yet to lose a single pound.

Admittedly, there have been some positive bodily changes during the past four months. I "feel" that I am shrinking; muscle has definitely replaced fat. My stomach is flatter and I have the thigh strength of Wayne Rooney. And, of course, Save the Children will benefit from my efforts.

But I'm not alone in finding that marathon returns are not always as expected. Christina Macdonald, editor of *Women's Running* magazine, who is taking part in her first marathon in Brighton tomorrow, has been surprised by changes in her own shape: she has gained 3lb since starting training in January and added an inch to her waist measurement.

Google "marathon weight gain" and there are forums galore for disgruntled runners to swap experiences on this undesired effect of training. "I've put on almost 10lb in four months while training for my first marathon. And it's not all muscle because my clothes are tighter," complains one woman on runnersworld.com. In reply, a four-time marathon runner called Tom writes: "Wish I had good news for you — I don't. The more miles I run, the fatter I get."

John Brewer, Professor of Sport at the University of Bedfordshire, who is running his 13th marathon in London, says too many runners assume that weight will drop off once they start training. "In reality, it's not that easy," he says. "To lose 1kg in body fat, you need to burn about 8,000 calories more than you consume. Most people burn about 100 calories per mile, so that's around 80 miles of running just to lose one kilo, even if you don't eat extra food."

It is possible to increase calorie burning (up to as many as 600 an hour) by running a faster pace. But, unless you are an elite runner, the likelihood is that the bulk of your training will be more of a slow, continuous plod. Certainly, I haven't broken into a sprint since I started following my schedule, nor for the previous five marathons I have completed. Yet, when I have prepared for a shorter distance with lots of speed work, the pounds have melted away. "Running faster or adding bursts of speed to your running will boost metabolism and burn

more calories,” Brewer says. “Plus there’s the fact that you don’t tend to feel as hungry if you are training for shorter events.”

But isn’t being able to eat what you like one of the advantages of all this training? Linia Patel, a sports dietitian with the British Dietetic Association, says it’s a misapprehension that running is a green light to increase the calories. “Appetite often soars when you exercise a lot,” Patel says. “You need to be careful about eating enough to support the activity without overdoing it, so that you aren’t burning the excess energy off.”

It’s easy to tip the balance. Nick Troop, publisher of *Men’s Running* magazine, says he thought it odd that he wasn’t losing weight when training for his first marathon in 1993. “It was only when my wife pointed out that perhaps it was because of the family-sized bowl of popcorn I was eating every night that I realised I might need to do more miles and eat less,” he says.

On top of the hunger factor, there are the isotonic drinks, gels and energy shots, the jelly beans and the cereal bars that are billed as essential for a runner’s survival but are, in fact, the scourge of many a runner’s waistline. I’ve had to coax myself to drink Lucozade Sport, the official isotonic fluid of the London Marathon, retching on its syrupy sweetness but knowing that, without the carbohydrate it provides, I stand little chance of going the distance.

But Patel says that many runners believe that the more sugar-laden fluids and gloopy gels they drink, the less jelly-legged and more Paula Radcliffe they’ll become. “There is definitely a place for energy products, but it’s important people use them correctly,” Patel says. “You need them on long runs, but on short runs water will suffice. With about 140 calories a bottle, they will lead to weight gain if you take too many.”

Mark Cooper, an ultra-distance runner who is preparing for a world record attempt to cover the most miles in five days, experienced precisely that. “Despite running six consecutive marathons in six days and burning more than 18,000 calories, I still managed to gain weight,” he says. “This can only have been down to the energy drinks and bars I’d been taking.”

How much does it matter? Brewer says that unless you are overweight in the first place, there is no physiological requirement to become lighter to run a marathon. “Not losing weight while marathon training is, in fact, not a bad thing,” he says. “It shows that you are consuming the calories that you need to support training. If you are in energy deficit, which is needed to lose weight, it’s likely that you will be constantly tired and lethargic when running.”

And, of course, running is not all about shedding pounds. It should never be the reason you decide to run 26.2 miles; it would prove a futile goal. For me, running is the ultimate route to stress release and boosted self-esteem. It keeps me sane. And what marathons, in particular, teach you is to shift your thinking from what your body looks like to how it can perform, something you don’t get from image-focused classes at the gym.

Gaining too much weight, though, can begin to make running seem like even more hard work. Researchers at the University of Georgia showed that a 5 per cent weight gain led to a 5 per cent reduction in speed. Another study found that a 12st runner needed to exert 6.5 per cent more effort to run at the same pace as a 10st one.

Between now and next Sunday, the 40,000 of us taking part in the London Marathon can expect our shorts to get even tighter. We are now mid-taper, running minimal miles to prepare our legs for the test of their lives. Over the next few days we will be expending less energy, but consuming more as we carbo-load on pasta, potatoes and bread to ensure that our muscles are primed with glycogen. On race day we can expect to expend a relatively paltry 2,800 calories if we make it around the 26.2-mile route — that's little more than the calorific value of a three-course Sunday dinner.

And, of course, we then deserve to celebrate. I am already planning the topping on the pizza I am going to devour after I finish.

Peta running for Save the Children: justgiving.com/PETA-BEE1

Do's and don'ts of running for weight loss

- Try to include some runs at a faster pace or to incorporate hill-running and interval training into your weekly programme. It will speed calorie burning.
- Use isotonic sports drinks and energy gels only before, during and after longer runs. They are designed to top up energy stores with carbohydrate and contain about 140 calories per bottle or sachet.
- On shorter runs, water will suffice. Or try a DIY sports drink made from diluted squash with a pinch of salt. Rehydrate after a run with plain or diluted fruit juice (it contains potassium and minerals lost in sweat).
- Be careful what you snack on; try to boost your “nutrition-per-calorie ratio”. In other words, eat more nutritious foods — grains, legumes, lean meat, vegetables and fruit — and fewer processed ones.
- After hard or long runs, help your muscles to refuel by consuming 300 to 400 calories of a carbohydrate-based snack with a little protein (such as breakfast cereals with milk and a banana) as soon as you can tolerate it. If you can't face food, take a fruit smoothie (unsweetened).
- Remember that some of the weight you gain or maintain will be fluid. It is crucial to be well-hydrated to run 26.2 miles. Glycogen, the muscles' fuel, is also stored with water in the body.