

How to Train for a Triathlon

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With modest and regular effort, you can accomplish things you may never have dreamed of. The triathlon community is filled with a wide range of people, all of whom just get out there and do it. You can build tremendous camaraderie and support with others when you are all out to try something hard (what other sport has a 90 minute "sprint?"). And with some simple and proper preparation, you too can be a triathlete.

Method
1

Method 1 of 5: Getting Equipped for Your Next Race



1 **Decide what kind of race you want to participate in.** For your first triathlon, you may want to stick with a sprint distance. It's still hard! When you go to sign up, know what you're going in for; the distance varies greatly.^[1]

- ***Sprint Triathlons:*** The shortest (though still arduous) varies in specific length, but many of them have around a 0.5-mile (0.8-kilometer) swim, 15-mile (24-kilometer) bike ride and 3-mile (5-kilometer) run.^[2] The distances are not as concrete as longer triathlons that have set parameters.
- ***The Olympic Triathlon:*** This is the most common triathlon out there. It's a 0.93 miles (1.5 kilometers) swim, a 24.8 miles (40 kilometers) bicycle route and a 6.2 miles (10 kilometers) run.
- ***The Half Ironman:*** This one is a 1.2 miles (1.93 kilometers) swim, a 56 miles (90 kilometers) bike ride and a 13 mile (21 kilometers) run.
- ***The Ironman Triathlon:*** This 2.4 mile (3.9 kilometer) swim, 112 mile (180 kilometer) bike ride and 26.2 mile (42.2 kilometer) marathon is probably the most famous.



2 Sign up. There are several websites and magazines that can use to search for and register for triathlons, including TriFind.com, Active.com, RaceTwitch.com, LAVA Magazine, and Triathlete Magazine (the magazines are great resources for finding out all sorts of interesting things about triathlons in general).

- Before you sign up for a race, you should look into the race details, which you can usually find on the triathlon's website. For example, is the race extremely hilly or flat? Is the swim in a choppy ocean or flat lake? If you're a new swimmer, you might want to choose a body of water that is easier to swim in. Some triathlons are off-road, which may appeal to you if you prefer to mountain bike rather than ride on a paved road



3 Get your gear. [3] To do well in a triathlon, you need decent gear. You could go running, biking and swimming in an old Peter Frampton t-shirt and gym shorts, but 10 minutes in and even your skin is going to start putting up a fight. Do yourself a favor and get the right equipment. You'll need:

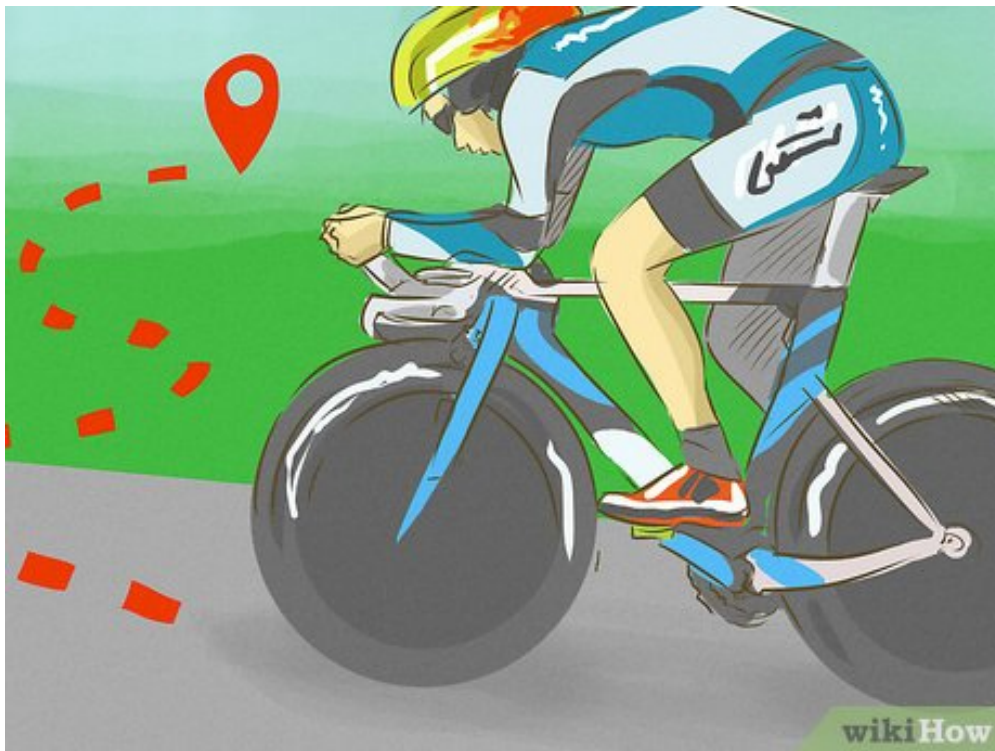
- Swim suit, goggles, and cap. If you will be swimming in cold water, consider a wetsuit. A wetsuit will help keep you warm in cold water temperatures.[4] Be aware that the tradeoff of wearing a wetsuit is that it may hinder your range of motion or swimming stroke. If you're going to wear a wetsuit in a race, be sure you practice in it ahead of time.
- A helmet that fits you and bicycle that is reliable. Road bikes, mountain bikes, and hybrids all work swell. A special triathlon bike or time trial bike isn't necessary, though if you have one, by all means, use it.
- Cycling shorts for training. Worn without undies, these will keep your woes from piling up (your legs hurt enough as it is -- why add your butt and skin into the mix?)
 - Cycling shoes and clip-less pedals have their purposes, but you can make do without them just fine.
- A water bottle. This will be your best friend.
- A nice pair of running shoes. Don't spend your entire paycheck on them, but do go to your local running store and get a pair that fit your feet properly. The folks will insist on helping you and *let* them. They know what they're doing.[5]

Method 2 of 5: Becoming a Triathlete



1 Train in each event. You are going to swim, ride and run. Therefore, each week, you should swim, bike and run. It's simplest to do each activity twice a week, saving one day for rest.

- Rest is imperative. Your body needs time to heal. Don't think of it as slacking -- you're just being smart about training.



2 Know the training stages for building an effective triathlon training plan. There are several training stages that will help you reach maximum success in your triathlon training. The stages are what an athlete Builds a training program around relative to where they are in their training progress. Based on your fitness level, the stages will dictate the kind of intensity and distance that you will engage in. Individuals who are new to triathlon training should at the Base stage and go from there. The training stages include:[6]

- The Base stage has increasing distance, low intensity
- The Build stage has distance maxing, moving toward moderate intensity
- The Peak stage has decreasing distance, moving toward high peak intensity
- The Race stage has decreasing distance, decreasing intensity from high toward moderate
- The Taper stage has decreasing distance, decreasing intensity from moderate to low
 - There is some taper pre- and post-race, depending on the racing schedule.



3 Plan out your timeline. Different types of triathlons require different training schedules and timelines. Your timeline is also dependent on your fitness level and personal lifestyle (for example, if you work a lot or you have a family to care for).

- Sprint distances may take 4-6 weeks to train for, while Olympic distances may take 3-6 months.
- If you are training for a 70.3 or 140.6 race, be sure to adopt the training stages (base through taper) to ensure that you train properly and safely. Training for these can take 6 months to a year.



4 Train in amounts that are proportionate to your distance races. Swimming often constitutes 10-20% of a race, biking often constitutes 40-50% of a race, and running often constitutes 20-30% of a race. When you're training, keep this in mind.

- Also, think about the type of race you're running. What kind of water will you be in? Are you biking and running on hills? What kind of terrain? If you can train in a similar state, the race will be a lot less surprising.



5 Practice some "brick" sessions about a month ahead of your event. A brick is where you do two disciplines back to back. An example of a brick session is a 45-minute cycle ride followed by a 15- to 20-minute run. This gets you used to changing muscle groups.

- Even if you can swim like a fish, run like you're being chased by wolves, and cycle like there's no tomorrow, if you can't do them back to back, you won't do well in a triathlon. Doing brick sessions will teach your body how to cope when the actual race comes around.
- You can change what you're doing based on the day of the week; you may want to devote one day to swimming, one day to running, one day to biking, one day to stretching, one day to rest, then two days to brick sessions that combine the types of exercise.



6 Consider joining a Masters swim program to become more proficient in the water. These programs generally accept all levels of skill in the water. Having access to a pro instructor certainly never hurts.

- Ask your swim coach where he/she would train and what open water is available for you to practice in. Pools are good, but they're just not the same as a lake or river.
- If possible, swim in squares in the pool or do not push off of the walls; you won't have the chance to rest ever 25 yards when you are in the open water.
- Becoming a proficient swimmer will help your triathlon performance overall, but keep in mind that the swim is the shortest (and some would say least significant) portion of the triathlon.



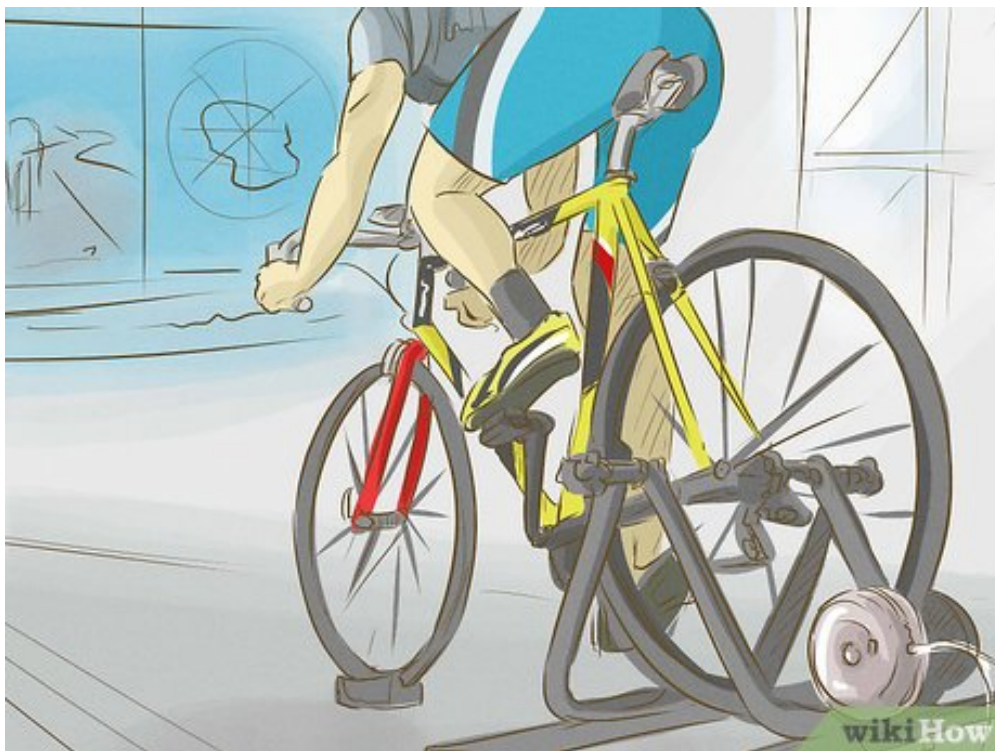
7 Build practice triathlons into your training. You may spend a lot of your training time working on the sports one at a time, but you do not want your actual triathlon race to be the first time you bike, swim, and run all at the same time. You can work on transitions ahead of time by doing practice triathlons.

- It's also a good idea to eat and drink while you are training. You can get a snack in after your swim and before your run. Stay hydrated and be sure to keep up your carbs while you are in training.



8 Start with some sprint races. This is usually around a ~700 meter (765 yard) swim, ~15 mile (24 km) bike and a 5K (3.1 mi) run. You do not need to set a land-speed record, just use the races as a learning experience. You can use sprint races as a building block for longer races (international, half-ironman, and **ironman**), or you can choose to focus on sprint races. But you need to race to put all the training together.

- Sprints are a good jumping off point. You can never start at the top of the ladder for anything, so a smaller triathlon is a good place to begin. It's also safest for your body.



9 Train over the winter using a bike trainer. In the off-season, you can do a lot of long, steady distance work that will build a strong network of capillaries in your legs that will serve you well in the summer during race season.

- As soon as you can, get outside. You'll want to be able to get accustomed to the handle of the bike. Cycling outside is a very different experience than cycling indoors, stationary.

Method 3 of 5: Following a Training Schedule



1 Establish your training in weeks 1-3. Your first weeks should be about getting started, establishing a routine, and familiarizing yourself with your equipment. A sample schedule for your first weeks, which are suitable for 12 weeks of training for an Olympic distance race, may be:

- Monday: Rest day
- Tuesday: Bike 30 minutes
- Wednesday: Swim 750 yards
 - Increase to 1000 yards in week 3
- Thursday: Run 30 minutes
- Friday: Do yoga for 30 minutes
- Saturday: Bike 15 miles and swim (brick training)
- Sunday: Run 3 miles and swim (brick training)



2 Increase your distance in weeks 4-7. After you begin to be comfortable in your workout routine, you should push yourself by increasing the distance gradually. A sample schedule for weeks 4-7 could be:

- Monday: Rest day
- Tuesday: Bike 30 minutes
 - Increase to 45 minutes in weeks 6 and 7
- Wednesday: Swim 1500 yards
 - Increase to 2000 yards in week 7
- Thursday: Run 30 minutes
- Friday: Do yoga for 30 minutes
 - Increase to 60 minutes in weeks 6 and 7
- Saturday: Bike 20 miles and swim (brick training)
 - Increase to 25 miles in week 6 and 30 miles in week 7
- Sunday: Run 4 miles and swim (brick training)
 - Increase to 5 miles in weeks 6 and 7



3 Focus on speed and distance in weeks 8-12. Now is the time to step up your training by trying to make your swimming, biking, and running faster while you continue to increase distance. In the case of timed workouts, this will mean that you're covering more distance. For the distance workouts, you will get done faster as you increase your speed. A sample schedule for weeks 8-12 might look like this:

- Monday: Rest day
- Tuesday: Bike 60 minutes
- Wednesday: Swim 2000 yards
 - Increase to 2500 yards in weeks 10-12
- Thursday: Run 30 minutes
- Friday: Do yoga for 60 minutes
- Saturday: Bike 35-40 miles and swim (brick training)
- Sunday: Run 6 miles and swim (brick training)
 - Increase to 7 miles in weeks 10 and 11 and 8 miles in week 12



4 Have an off day. It is good for your body to rest, so even when you're in intense training mode, try to give yourself one day every week to rest. It may be easiest to have it be the same day every week.



5 Taper before a race. The one to two weeks before your race, you should work on tapering your training. This means that you will continue to train with the LESS intensity AND for shorter distances or times. If you do a 2-week taper, you should aim for about 20% less workout volume the first week and 25% less volume the second week.^[7] You should take the day before the race totally off from any training and stay off of your feet as much as possible.



6 Listen to your body. When you are training for such an intensive competition, you need to listen to what your body is telling you. This will help ensure that you stay in good health and train safely. [8]

- Monitor your heart rate. As you get into better shape, your resting heart rate slows down. It should be its slowest in the morning right when you wake up. Try counting your heart rate for 10 seconds first thing in the morning. Keep track every day so that you know your normal rate. If your heart rate is higher than normal, you may be getting sick or your body may not have recovered from the previous day's training. If your rate is too high, skip training for the day.
- Don't exercise if you have a fever or other symptoms of illness such as muscle aches or chills.
- Pay attention to symptoms such as shortness of breath, fainting, lightheadedness or chest pain. These can be indicative of heart issues. Stop exercising right away and see a doctor if you are concerned.
- If you've been sick, make sure you return to training with patience and reasonable expectations until you are fully well.

Method 4 of 5: Incorporating Strength Training



1 Work in strength training into your training schedule. Strength training is a key element in preparing your body to compete in a triathlon. It's also one of the most overlooked elements. For an endurance race like a triathlon, you need to build muscle strength as well as muscle endurance.^[9]

- Strength training is also important for preventing injuries.
- Work in 15-20 minutes of strength training at least 1-2 times per week. Increase this frequency by 10% every week as you work through your triathlon training schedule. Decrease your strength training every 3 weeks for a week to allow your body time to recover.



2 Get a physical assessment by a trainer. A trainer can help you identify muscle areas of your body that might be weak or that are giving you unnecessary resistance. This person can help you come up with a program for strength training.



3 Try circuit training. Circuit training is a series of short, intense exercises that work various muscle groups. This will help you build muscle endurance and muscle strength.

- To build muscle endurance, focus on doing higher repetitions with lighter weight or resistance. Do 5-10 repetitions of each of the following exercises at first, building to 20-30 reps as you get stronger: sit-ups, push-ups, squats, reverse lunge, side lunge, and plank hold. Do this circuit 10 times.^[10]
- To build muscle strength, try lifting free weights or machine weights. Perform 15 reps of the following: bench press, triceps dips, pull-ups, seated dumbbell shoulder press, seated dumbbell bicep curl, leg press, standing/lying hamstring curl, standing calf raise, and stability ball abdominal crunch. Try this circuit 2-6 times.^[11]



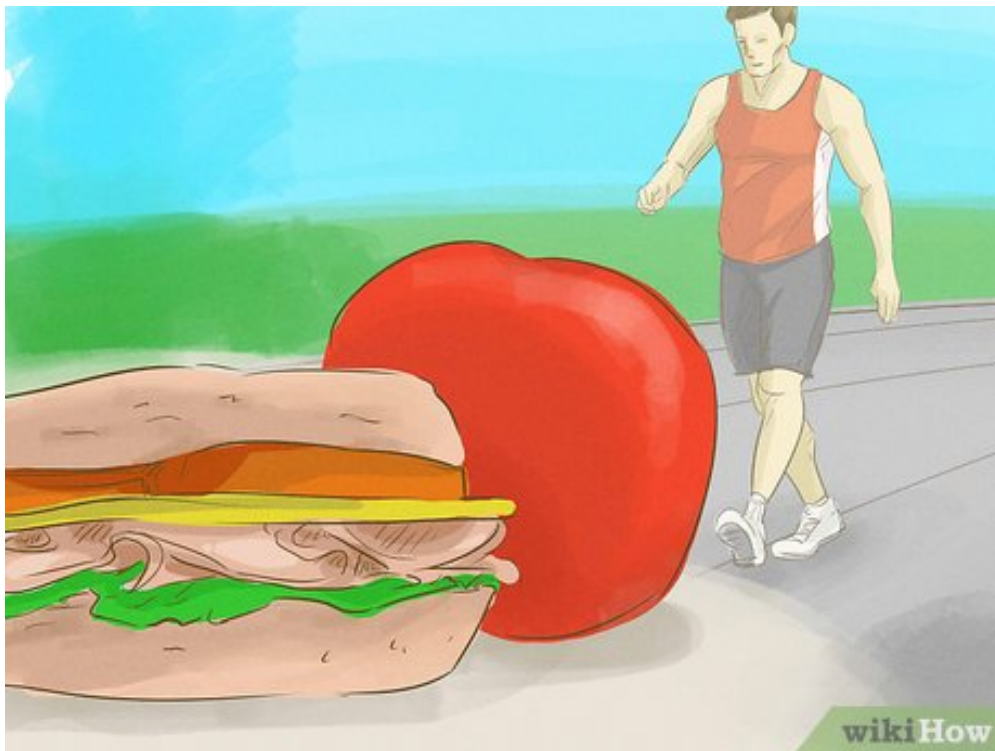
4 Work on your agility. You want to make sure you're performing at your maximum coordination when you're competing in your triathlon. This helps you move faster and more strongly. Try agility drills to increase your speed and movement, such as box jumps, side touches, and side high knees.

- Get an agility ladder to help you with these drills. An agility ladder is a flat rope ladder that is placed on the ground. You can also make one by drawing on the sidewalk with chalk or laying out string or rope on the ground.^[12]



1 Fuel up. You're doing some pretty intense workouts -- by anyone's standards. It is *absolutely imperative* that you stay hydrated and you get enough energy (carbs) to stay powered. Always, always, always, carry a water bottle with you in addition to eating the right energy foods.

- Calculate the necessary carbs and fluids you will need. Then determine how many carbs are in the drinks and foods you're consuming. You try to consume 30-60g (1-2 oz) of carbohydrates per hour, but remember that your size, gender, and age may alter what you need. Talk to your doctor and tell him/her what you're doing; they'll be able to point you in the right direction.
- Carefully monitor your diet. You need whole grains, vegetables, fruits and lean meats. Stay away from processed foods! You want to carefully control any weight loss to a pound or two a week in order to maintain energy.



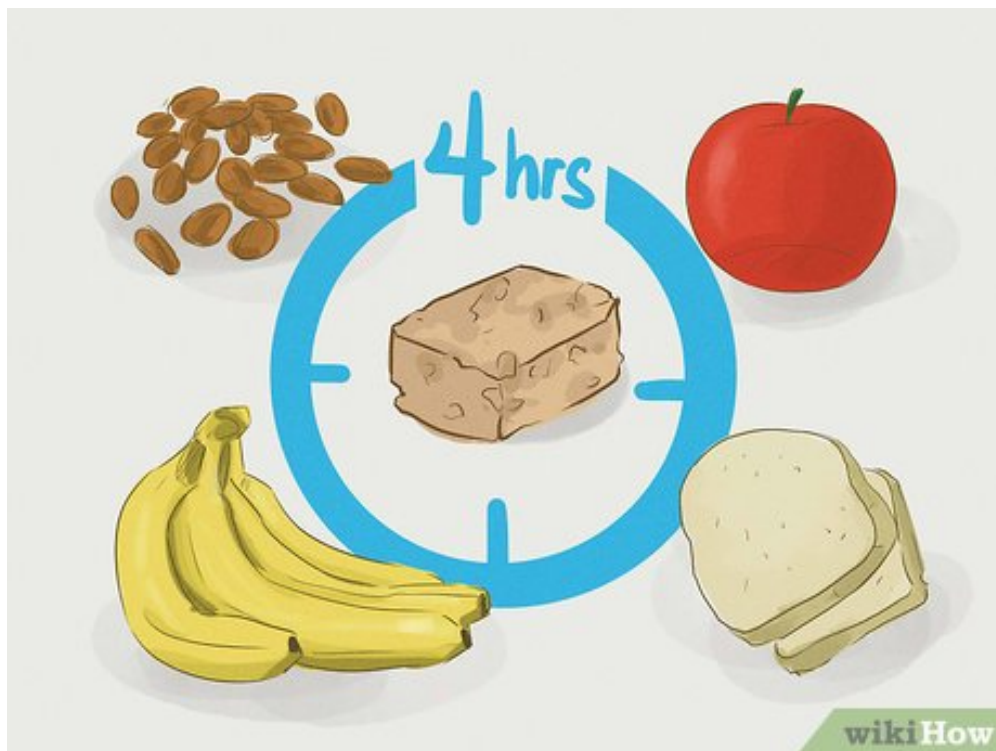
2 Plan your post-workout meals. If you don't, you'll probably end up not getting the right nutrition. Generally people fall into two categories: those who don't want to eat anything post-workout and those who want to eat everything in sight. Neither are good for you.

- Make sure you have the right nutrition at hand at the finish (pre-planning makes this simple). Chocolate milk, salted nuts, or a peanut butter sandwich are good options to see you through until the next meal.



3 Have your main meal at lunch. If you're training in the afternoon or into the evening, the last thing you want to do is sit down to a big meal at 9 PM and have it churning away in your stomach as you sleep. Not only will it make it harder to get that much needed shut eye, but it'll lead to increased fat production and weight retention.

- Eat a bigger meal for lunch and a smaller meal in the evening. Your evening meal could be:
 - Beans
 - Eggs on toast
 - Vegetable bean soup with bread
 - Sushi and a fruit smoothie



4 Stack on snacks. Don't go more than 4 hours without eating -- you are a calorie-burning machine and thus need (deserve, really) the energy. You also avoid the post-workout binging this way and your insulin doesn't spike needlessly (never a good thing).

- Plan your snacks so you never go without food or drink for longer than four hours. Good snacks include low fat yogurt, a small handful of mixed nuts, fruit smoothies, fruit salad, good-quality bars such as Eat Natural or Nature Valley Chewy bars, malt loaf or Ryvita with cottage cheese and tomato.



5 Don't go overboard on fat and carbs. You definitely need energy, but a huge part of energy is nutrition. Make sure you're getting *the right* carbs and *the right* fats -- not piling slabs of butter on white bread.

- Calculate your daily calorie requirement, but be sure to think about the calories you are burning while training.



6 Stay hydrated. As with all physical exercise programs, make sure you stay hydrated. Strive to drink AT LEAST eight 8-oz glasses of water a day. Soda doesn't count! It actually dehydrates you.



Tips

- Practice your transitions before your first race. You need to be able to switch between swimming and biking quickly, and then be able to quickly dismount and rack your bike, so you can gear up and run. This can be extremely awkward if you have never practiced it before.
- Practice swimming in open water and U-turns on your bike.
- Practice the transition between the swim and bike and bike and run. It will save lots of time if you practice that and your dismount.
- Listen to your body. The last thing you want to do is hurt yourself and ultimately keep yourself from racing.
- Challenge a friend to do a triathlon with you. This will keep you motivated, and will keep you safe when swimming, because the number 1 rule is "never swim alone."
- Find two or three races in your area. The races help you stay focused on why you are training. Having just one race puts too much stress on the race. You will always have one race that didn't work out well. Having more than one in the season will help you stay happy about training. After all, this is fun!
- Look for a triathlon club in your area. Check out [USA Triathlon's website](#), or look for a health club, YMCA, or sports store with a bulletin board.
- Did you get the point about having fun? This should be fun, so have fun!
- Limber up before exercise. Stretch after exercise. Too many people try to stretch with cold muscles, which injures them. People also forgo the stretching when the muscles are warm. This leads to tight muscles and (you guessed it) injury.

- Each sport has a form guide. For swimming, check out the "Total Immersion" technique.^[13] For biking, strive for excellent bike fit. For running, check out the Pose Technique.



Warnings

- Do not start any fitness program without clearance from a doctor.
- Hydration is key. You need to drink on the bike (because you can't in the water and won't want to during the run). Balance and moderation is necessary to avoid dehydration or hyponatremia.
- Carefully stressing your body and then recovering fully is how you build endurance and strength. Going too hard, or not taking enough recovery time are classic newbie mistakes.

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About This Article



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This article was co-authored by **Eric Kottke**. Eric Kottke has been doing triathlons for over 18 years. He completed his first sprint distance triathlon in LA in 1997. This article has been viewed 168,313 times.

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