

Fartlek Workout 101

**BY LANCE WATSON**

Fartleks challenge your body to become faster over longer distances—plus it’s just a fun word to say. Here’s all you need to know about fartlek running, and three workouts to try on your own.

The word “fartlek” is a Swedish term which means “speed play.” It is a training method that blends continuous (endurance) training with [interval (speed) training](https://www.trainingpeaks.com/blog/simple-tips-to-help-you-run-a-faster-10k-without-running-on-the-track/).

Fartlek runs challenge the body to adapt to various speeds, conditioning you to become faster over longer distances. Most run workouts typically target one or two paces, and a basic long run is done at a single, steady pace.

Unlike intervals, where you stop or walk for recovery, Fartlek is continuous running. Fartlek running involves varying your pace throughout your workout.

While top speed might not match intervals, your overall average heart rate (HR) should be higher for a fartlek workout than for intervals, because the jogging recovery also means HR does not drop as low during the recovery portions. It is great for a variety of fitness levels and can be customized according to personal preference and current training situation.

**Different Ways to Run Fartleks**

Fartlek can be structured, though classic fartlek is based on feel and inspiration. “Run hard up the hill to the crest, jog to cross walk, accelerate the short downhill, jog to the intersection, run quickly around the block” versus “run 6-5-4-3-2 minutes faster with 2 minutes jogging recovery,” is an example of a structured fartlek.

Fartlek workouts are versatile. A traditional fartlek is run on the road using available landmarks as guides. If you are the analytical type, take your fartlek to the track and use set distances. Live in the city? Use lamp posts or blocks as distances for easy, medium and hard efforts. Bad weather? Bring your fartlek workout inside on a[treadmill](https://www.trainingpeaks.com/blog/the-ultimate-interval-treadmill-session-to-improve-speed-and-beat-boredom/). Out of town and worried about getting lost? Fartlek is a great way to make a small loop more interesting. Have a friend joining your workout? Even if you both may run at different speeds you can regroup at certain landmarks or times. Can’t avoid the hills? Great! Hills are effective means to elevate your heart rate and work on strength, speed and endurance. As you can see, fartleks can be done anywhere—it’s convenient and packs a powerful punch of benefits.

**Fartlek Improves Your Mental Game**

Beyond physical benefits, fartlek also trains the mind, strengthening willpower, sustaining and repeating efforts when you feel like stopping.

We can all probably relate to a race situation when the mind can overwhelm us, questioning whether we can maintain the pace or respond to an opponent’s attack. The more training sessions we do that incorporate this speed variation, the more resistant we become to giving up mentally mid-race. The body can usually go much longer and faster than the mind would have it believe it can.

**The Benefits of Fartlek Training**

* Improve speed
* Improve endurance
* Improve race tactics; improves your ability to put surges into races and overtake a competitor or knock seconds off your finish time.
* Improve mental strength.
* Fartlek provides a lot of flexibility, so you can do a high intensity session to push your limits or a low intensity session if you are tapering for a race or easing back into running post-injury.
* Fartlek is playful, playing with speed and saying the word often elicits giggles!

**Three Sample Fartlek Workouts**

LONG RUN FARTLEK

* During your longest run of the week, pick up your pace for 1:00 minute every 6 to 8 minutes. This is not drastically faster—perhaps 15 to 20 seconds per mile faster than your normal long-run pace. If you have a hard time returning to “normal” long-run rhythm, then you are running the surges too quickly.

SPEED PLAY

* After a 12 minute warm-up jog, plus a few drills and strides
* Build for 3 minutes as moderate, moderate-hard, hard each for 1 minute
* 2 minutes jog
* 7 minutes moderate-hard
* 3 minutes jog
* 3 minutes hard
* 5 minutes jog
* Cool down or repeat

“SURROUNDINGS” FARTLEK

* After 10 minutes of warm-up jogging pick a landmark in the distance—this can be a telephone pole, mailbox, a tree, a building, etc, and run to it at a faster pace. Once you have reached it, slow down and recover with your normal running pace for as long as you need (just don’t fully stop), then find a new landmark and speed it up again. Keep in mind that there are no rules here, so run on feel as you go along.

Fartlek Training for Beginners – Everything You Need to Know About Fartlek Trainin

**What is Fartlek Training?**

Fartlek training, which translates to “speed play” in Swedish, is similar to interval training. It involves varying pace or difficulty during maintained cardio. So essentially while doing cardio you switch it up every now and again with increased pace.

Pivotal to Fartlek training is the aspect of fun. Your intervals should not be rigid and set in stone, instead you should be sporadic and spontaneous, randomly deciding to speed up, even if only for 10 seconds. Unlike traditional interval training, it’s all about how you feel; if you think you can push yourself that little bit extra, you do. If not, no worries.

How you measure your intervals is entirely up to you, or your environment. You may use lampposts as measures, sprinting between two then slowing for the new few. You might jog leisurely listening to music then increase pace during the chorus. You could even just speed up every time you see a dog. That’s the ‘fun’ part about Fartlek; it’s unpredictable, erratic and random.

**Fartlek vs Interval Training**

Although similar, and both orientated around improving speed and endurance, Fartlek and interval training differ in rigidity.

Fartlek is all about changing things up and being unpredictable, only doing what you want and can manage by playing with speed. You may not necessarily have a goal in mind, in fact this is almost preferable, and just want to increase endurance without restricting pressure.

Interval training also involves runners increasing and decreasing pace at various intervals; however, these intervals are calculated, planned and specific. Where Fartlek measures intervals using practically anything, interval training uses distance or time.

Regardless of whether you like structure or fancy being spontaneous, both training methods utilise aerobic and anaerobic exercise, creating an extremely effective workout.

**Is Fartlek Training Just for Running?**

Fartlek training works with practically any maintained cardio, from swimming or cycling to running or rowing. Any cardio exercise which involves maintaining a level which can be changed at any point is ideal.

When swimming in a pool, you could randomly do a maximum effort lap every now and again. When rowing you could choose a point to go full steam ahead. Or when cycling you could find a point to pedal as fast as you can. The options are endless!

**Benefits of Fartlek Training**

If you aren’t already sold on this unique training method, seeing the positive effects it can have is sure to have you grabbing your trainers.

* **Time saving**– incorporating speedy bits into your workout will make it quicker. It’s that simple. No more claiming you have time to do your run, just include more intervals!
* **Burn more calories**– extended low impact cardio has its benefits, but high impact has more. Increase your pace, increase your heart rate, increase calorie burn. Win-win!
* **Have fun**– this isn’t to say running is boring but following the same route with the same routine can get a bit… monotonous. But fear not! Fartlek keeps you engaged with your run, especially if you indulge in the ‘play’ aspect.
* **Sports training**– if you play a sport such as football or hockey, you are probably not a stranger to interchanging a gentle jog for an intense sprint multiple times within minutes. Practise Fartlek and you will find you get better at this.

**Disadvantages of Fartlek Training**

Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Fartlek isn’t for everyone, and you do need to consider a few things before you start counting lampposts.

* **Fitness required**– you don’t have to be a trained athlete to do Fartlek (though it would help), but basic fitness is needed. Don’t worry though, if you are a beginner you could just walk for the low-effort sections.
* **Health risk**– if you have previous injuries or heart issues, you should consult a doctor before starting Fartlek training. If you aren’t sure whether to consult a doctor, consult a doctor. Fartlek involves doing maintained cardio and will increase your heart rate, so be sure you can do this.
* **Motivation**– while Fartlek can be super entertaining – like measuring intervals by how many dogs (!) you see – it may not be motivating for some. Having less routine may mean you give yourself a break lots instead of sticking to a plan. For those who like to take it easy, it may be better to set clear targets.

**Fartlek Training Examples**

As Fartlek revolves around freedom and spontaneity of an individual, there is little structure to a Fartlek workout. But, for example, you could plan to do a 30-minute run, with up to 15 high speed intervals. Or you may decide on your 1km circular park route there will be stretch you sprint each time you pass it. If you want more structure to your workout, consider using times (e.g. 1 minute sprint, 2 minutes jog, 1 minute sprint and repeat 4 times etc.), however this is much more like traditional interval training.

Significant to a successful run is warming up and down. Before you undertake any cardio, be sure to stretch and gently warm up your muscles; we recommend a brisk walk for 5-10 minutes.

**Fartlek Training Tips for Beginners**

If you are a beginner, you don’t want to push yourself too hard and get injured or put off running. Fartlek is ideal for those starting out and perhaps less aware of their endurance limits. You will quickly learn at what pace you feel comfortable, and how fast you can go for an interval. If you struggle to maintain a jogging pace, walk briskly and jog for your high-effort intervals.

When your interval is over, perhaps you’ve done 30 seconds or you’ve reached the goal landmark, slow back to your normal pace, let your breathing return to normal, then prepare yourself for the next interval.

Don’t fancy doing it alone? Grab a friend. Turn your workout into a game and switch around who gets to decide when an interval happens and how long it is. A little bit of competition will encourage even the most reluctant runner to keep up. [Find out all the benefits of exercising with a friend](https://www.raceatyourpace.co.uk/buddy-up-benefits-of-exercising-with-a-friend/).

Just remember: this isn’t rigid interval training. You can take your Fartlek workout at whatever pace suits you. Make your goals attainable and realistic and you will be overjoyed at the results.

**Fartlek Training With Race At Your Pace**

Why not take part in a virtual challenge with [Race At Your Pace](https://www.raceatyourpace.co.uk/)? Not only will you be motivated to exercise (you get a shiny medal!), you can complete you challenge however you like.

Race At Your Pace has [challenges](https://www.raceatyourpace.co.uk/enter/) for swimming, cycling, walking and running across a wide variety of distances. As long as you complete your distance within a month, it doesn’t matter whether you did it slow, fast, or a bit of both with Fartlek.

Race At Your Pace share the Fartlek philosophy; that exercising should be fun and engaging, and, most importantly, you should race at your own pace.