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Focus: Running's best playlist

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Whether it's the mandatory two miles for the Army Physical Fitness Test or a longer endurance event just for love of the sport, running is a daily part of life for Soldiers and often their Family members. And, with the preponderance of cellphones and media players, listening to music has become an easy way to pass time on the road.

The safety of doing so, however, has become a heated debate among runners and policy makers.

"Running with headphones always has been a hot-button topic," said Hal Higdon, longtime contributing author to Runner's World magazine, multiple Boston Marathoner and developer of popular training plans for races ranging from the 5k to marathon. "People love to run listening to music and often get angry if told this behavior might be inappropriate in certain situations."

Soldiers running on post don't have an option while on duty. Use of headphones and other electronic media is prohibited with wear of both the Improved Physical Fitness Uniform and Army Physical Fitness Uniform, according to Field Manual 7-22, Army Physical Readiness Training. Off duty, Army Regulation 385-10, The Army Safety Program, bans listening devices for Soldiers and other exercisers on or near installation roads and streets, though post commanders may permit earphones and music players on certain off-road trails and paths.

"Those restrictions are supported by various regulatory guidance," said Keith Hauret, Army Institute of Public Health, Army Public Health Center (Provisional). "The type of exercise doesn't matter. The regulation covers walking, jogging, running, skating, skateboarding and bicycling."

The issue with headphones, Higdon said, is the potential for distraction. Runners must always be aware of moving vehicles and their surroundings in general.

"The main problem is if the music is too loud and too distracting, it can be dangerous if you're running in traffic or where there might be unfriendly people up to no good," he explained. "So it's a matter of selection, knowing when you can listen to music safely and when you cannot."

In addition to the risk of devastating accidents, runners should also pay close attention to surface conditions and other factors that might lead to nagging injuries.

Despite their generally superior physical condition, Soldiers are just as susceptible to running injuries as their civilian counterparts. According to a study co-authored by Hauret and published in 2015 in the American Journal of Sports Medicine, about half of Soldiers reporting to military clinics with an

exercise-related injury are hurt while running. Strains and sprains in the lower extremities account for most of those visits.

“Running into a pothole or stepping off the road onto a lower shoulder can cause an injury that sidelines you for several weeks,” Hauret said. “It’s really about keeping focus on your form and where your feet are landing. Listening to music or a podcast can easily take your mind off those things.”

For Higdon, the joy of running is the experience — and digital media doesn’t necessarily make it better.

“During a race, but especially a major road race like the Chicago or Boston or New York City marathons, if you run listening to tunes you can hear any day of the week, you’re missing all the fun of what goes on around you,” he said.

For more information on running safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.