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Running Trails at Night

As always I like to repost this as the days get shorter and training in the dark becomes the norm.

Gina and I have run trails by headlamp and flashlight since we first got into trail running back in 2001. Due to time constraints, most of our fall and winter running occurs after dark. Both of us prefer to run on trails and don't want to let darkness keep us from staying in trail running shape. In addition, there are aspects of running at night that you just can't put into words.

A lot of people ask us how we can run at night because they feel it is more dangerous. My experience trail running and directing a night trail race for the last 4 years tells me the danger is the same as during the day, if not less. As long as you have a decent light you should have no problem with night running because of the following;

- Because it is dark you tend to run slower.
- You tend to be prepared for rocks and roots that can trip you.
- You, typically, are focused on the trail in front of you and little else.

Light Source:

If I'm out just running around I will use an LED flashlight, I prefer the brightness and the shadows provided from the flashlight over the weight and head clamping pressure of a headlamp (plus I like running in a hat and the bill blocks the headlamp beam).

For running fast or racing, my lighting preference is to use a LED headlamp and a flashlight. LEDs are a very energy efficient lighting source and cast a white glow (I can't stand to buy and go through a lot of batteries. LEDs have really helped increase the run time of battery operated lights). Depending on your LED headlamp, the beam emitted will be a glow or a focused beam. There are countless options of headlamps for a variety of uses. I've yet to find a headlamp that lights up the trail and allows you to get depth perception.

When running at night you get depth perception from shadows being cast from your light source. The best way to get shadows is to use a flashlight. Holding a light lower, in your hand, helps to get the shadows you need to identify rocks, roots, and other obstacles in your way. With this in mind I usually only run using a flashlight, but if I'm planning to run a trail fast, run a rocky or rooty trail, or run a steep downhill, I will also use a headlamp. Not only does this help minimize getting injured on the trail but it is also smart to have a backup light source in case your primary light stops working.

All major brands have a good selection of flashlights and headlamps. I'd say the most common ones you'll find locally will be Princeton Tec and Petzl. Both companies make great lights and the newest lights are starting to be sold with rechargeable batteries (an idea that should have come before now).