Blinky Lights
According to Mama Hobbit

One of these things is not like the others - can you guess which one is different?

Blinky light, reflective vest, light colored clothing, cap with light in bill and/or in back, battery powered strand of Christmas lights, iron-on reflective tape, chocolate cake

All of you who guessed chocolate cake (and I'm really hoping you didn't have to guess) get a gold star. When we talk about important pieces of equipment for running or walking, reflective gear is at the top of the list. Whether you train early in the morning or later in the evening, chances are, at some point you're going to find yourself training in the dark. Okay, if you're training on a treadmill early in the morning, or late in the evening, you probably won't need to worry so much about reflective gear, but at some point (I hope), you're going to need to wean yourself away from the treadmill and do some training outside to prepare yourself for race day conditions.

Just what are blinky lights? I'm so glad you asked. What I call a blinky light is any kind of light that can be attached to your body or water belt in some form or fashion. I don't care if it's a steady burning light, a blinking light, a pulsating light, or one that flashes the theme from Close Encounters of the Third Kind in multiple colors, just as long as it makes you highly visible when you're out training. You can usually find different safety blinking lights at running stores (like our training sponsor, Rock City Running), biking stores, sporting goods stores, retail stores, and on-line. One of my favorite blinking lights is sold at www.roadid.com, and it is called the Firefly Supernova. You can also find inexpensive blinking lights that pin on in the holiday section of most retail stores - not only does it blink, but you can have a themed blinking light - pumpkin, ghost, turkey, snowman, well you get the idea (the downside to these blinky lights is the battery doesn't usually last very long). When I mentioned the battery powered strand of Christmas lights, I wasn't joking, one of our athletes trains in the early morning hours with a small strand of Christmas lights that she wraps around her torso - not only do you see her coming toward you (or moving away), it's a twofer, cause it always makes you smile.

If you're not into blinking like a Christmas tree, then you could always go for the more traditional reflective vest - also sold in many different venues. And if you've got the image in your head of the old, bulky crossing guard vest you remember from your elementary school days, toss that out - the new generation of vests are light weight and breathable (which is really important if you're training in heat and humidity).

If you still aren't loving any of those ideas, you can go to a fabric store and buy about 12 inches or so of reflective ribbon and iron it or sew it on your water belt. If you don't want to permanently stick something to your water belt or your shirt - cut that ribbon into strips and safety pin it to your belt or your clothes. We did a midnight race that required you to have reflective safety ribbon as well as lights and I sewed some onto my water belt. It is very effective and not expensive. Tom didn't want me to sew his on and ran for years with that ribbon pinned to his water belt.

One thing to remember about reflective gear vs lights is the reflective material has to have something to reflect off of it - so, if no lights are shining on that material, it isn't doing much of anything - it's when the light hits it that it becomes visible.

The point to all this, other than just to see how creative we can be with lights and reflective tape, is to make sure you are highly visible to drivers, cyclists, and other runners and walkers. I try really hard to do a good job of looking for athletes who are out on foot or on a bicycle, but even those of us who think we're being cautious can be caught by surprise. Several years ago, I was heading to meet my training partner one morning about 4:30 am and all of a sudden, a runner just seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was a cooler morning and he was dressed all in black from the cap on his head to the shoes on his feet. There was not a reflective strip of anything on his apparel. There was no sidewalk on the street I was on and he was running right down the middle of the lane in which I was driving. I only saw him when he ran under a street light and, luckily, was able to avoid hitting him. I was also lucky that I'd been training for marathons and half marathons, because I believe that's all that kept me from having a heart attack, he scared me so badly. That runner probably doesn't realize how close he came to being hit, but I do, and sadly, he's not the only runner or walker I've seen out that was almost invisible.

A reminder for those of you who do have blinky lights - remember those gadgets are powered by batteries and batteries tend to wear out. My favorite blinky looked very sick last week, but when the batteries were replaced, it was back to its "burn your eyes right out of your head" glory.

Another reminder - if you're running or walking toward traffic (and I hope you are - that way you can see them if they don't see you), the blinky light or reflective gear you have on your back doesn't do much good. Ideally, having something on your front AND back so folks can see you whether you are heading toward them or away from them is always a good idea.

Bottom line, please, please, please get some kind of reflective gear or light to help folks see you when all they have on their mind is getting to the nearest coffee shop and not the athletes who are out on the street getting in their training mileage. If you don't have the time or the money to get something right away, at least pull out clothing that is light in color (surprisingly enough, the safety green and yellow shirts are easier to see in the dark than white) - don't depend upon the 2-inch strip of reflective material on your shoes to keep you safe.

Oh, and for all of you who earned the gold star? You know if I had them to pass out, they would be bright and blinking!