

SPORTS NUTRITION

There is no single magic food that will help you feel stronger, train harder and compete better. However, every food that you eat, in combination with when you eat, can affect your athletic performance.

Here are a few sports nutrition tips which may help you eat to win!

FUEL

The best fuels for your muscles are carbohydrates either simple sugars (such as the naturally occurring sugars in fruits and juices) or complex carbohydrates (the unrefined grains and starches in whole wheat bread, brown rice, bran cereal, oatmeal, etc.). These provide not only energy but are also important vitamins and minerals. If you consume too many refined carbohydrates (i.e. soft drinks, candy), you will fuel your muscles but neglect the spark plugs that help your engine run smoothly.

You store only carbohydrates, not protein nor fats, in your muscles in the form of glycogen (muscle sugar). During hard exercise, you burn this glycogen for energy. If you totally deplete your glycogen stores, such as the marathon runner who hits the wall, you feel overwhelmingly exhausted. Eating high carbohydrate foods (cereal, pancakes, bread, fruit, vegetables, potato, pasta) can help prevent early exhaustion.

QUICK ENERGY

Eating lots of sweets and sugary foods for quick energy before you exercise may hurt your performance. Here is why: After you eat any kind of concentrated sugar (i.e. dried fruit, juices, soft drinks, jelly beans, etc.), your body secretes insulin, a hormone that carries the sugar from your blood into the muscles. Exercise, like insulin, also helps carry sugar into the muscles. The combined effect of insulin with exercise can cause your blood sugar to drop abnormally low. You may experience hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and feel light-headed, shaky, tired and uncoordinated.

If you are craving an energy boost prior to exercise because you are hungry and feeling droopy, you do not have to eat sugary foods, per se, for energy. A simple snack of crackers, fruit or bread can perk you up without risking negative hypoglycemic (low sugar) effects.

The best solution to the quick energy problem is to prevent the need for an energy boost! Simply eat a bigger breakfast or lunch; fuel-up rather than try to run on fumes! You will have time to digest this food and store it in your muscles. You will be ready for action, not hungry and tired, prior to the afternoon or evening workout. You will be less likely to crave sweets for a quick fix because you will already have adequate energy stores for your workout.

FLUIDS

You are unlikely to starve to death during exercise. However, you can endanger your health and performance due to lack of fluids. To prevent yourself from becoming dehydrated, drink lots of liquids before, during and after strenuous exercise. Water is always safe before exercise; water and/or dilute sports drinks during exercise; water or juices afterwards. To tell if you have had adequate fluids, simply monitor your urine. It should be clear-colored and voluminous, NOT dark and concentrated.

PRE-COMPETITION MEALS

When you are planning strenuous morning exercise (such as competing in a 9 AM road-race), you will fuel your muscles best if you eat a high-carbohydrate meal the night before. By eating a hearty amount of pasta, potato, rice, noodles, bread and other carbohydrates for dinner, you will have time to digest the food and store it in your muscles as glycogen. If you were to eat a big breakfast prior to the race, the food would sit undigested in your stomach and merely bounce along for the ride. This might cause discomfort or pit stops! Hence, you will want to do most of your pre-competition eating either the day before a morning event or at least 3-4 hours before an afternoon or evening competition.

Some athletes like to eat a small snack within 1-2 hours of exercise. This keeps them from feeling hungry and can help maintain a normal blood sugar level. Some popular choices include cereal with low fat milk, one or two slices of toast or some plain crackers. Avoid large, fatty meals (such as the traditional steak-and-eggs breakfast) that tend to sit heavily in the stomach for 3-4 hours.

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RECOVERY FOODS

You should eat carbohydrate-rich foods within one to four hours after hard exercise to replace the glycogen that you burned off. Your muscles are most receptive to replacing this fuel at that time. A simple post-exercise refresher might be orange juice and bananas, rich sources of fluid, carbohydrates, potassium and vitamins. Remember that only carbohydrates quickly refuel your muscles and prepare your workout the following day. Hence, if you are tempted to choose a greasy burger with French fries for your recovery feast, choose instead carbohydrate-rich thick crust pizza with single cheese and veggie toppings, or a dinner that focuses on potato, bread, vegetables, juices and other carbohydrates.

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