

SportsNutrition

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SPORTS NUTRITION TIPS

Without a doubt, *what* you eat—and *when* you eat—affects your athletic performance. By wisely selecting your sports diet, you can become stronger, train harder and thereby compete better. The following sports nutrition tips can help you fuel your muscles optimally to reach your goals.

FUEL: The best foods to fuel your muscles are carbohydrates—the natural sugars and starches found in vegetables, fruits, grains, dried beans, and legumes. Carb-rich fruits include bananas, raisins, pineapple, and all fresh, dried, or canned fruits. Carb-rich vegetables include sweet potato, peas, carrots, and all vegetables. Carb-rich grains include oatmeal and other hot or cold cereals; whole wheat breads, bagels, crackers and pasta; (preferably brown) rice; and corn. Lentils, chick peas, pinto beans and other dried beans and legumes are also carb-rich. Refined sugars, such as sugary soft drinks, sports drinks, gels and candy, also fuel muscles. However, they lack the “spark plugs” (vitamins, minerals, other nutrients) that help your body’s engine run best.

Your muscles store only carbohydrates—not protein or fat—in a form of sugar called glycogen. During hard exercise, your muscles burn this glycogen for energy. When you deplete your glycogen stores, as happens if you eat too few grains, fruits, and vegetables during repeated days of hard training, you can end up feeling needlessly fatigued. Plan to consume carbs on a daily basis to help prevent fatigue.

Protein helps build muscles, but grains, fruits and veggies are best to *fuel* muscles. While you should include a protein-rich food at each meal, the protein should be the *accompaniment* to the rice, pasta or potato, not the main focus.

QUICK ENERGY: If you are hungry, tired and needing a boost 15 minutes prior to exercise, your body wants quick energy. A simple snack of banana, raisins, or a granola bar can perk you up, as can a spoonful of honey. Better yet, *prevent* the need for an energy boost by eating a heartier breakfast and lunch that offers enough fuel so you won’t be running on fumes later that afternoon. These meals will be digested in plenty of time before your afternoon or evening workout. You will be ready for action, not tired and hungry.

Some active people discover that eating sugary foods for quick energy 15 to 45 minutes before exercise hurts their performance. The sugar causes the body to secrete insulin which, when combined with exercise, can cause blood sugar to drop quickly. If you are sensitive to blood sugar changes, you may feel light-headed, uncoordinated, shaky and tired. This is needless—and preventable.

PRE-EXERCISE MEALS: Many athletes believe they should exercise with an empty stomach. Research suggests otherwise; pre-exercise food actually improves performance! Part of your training is to train your intestinal tract to tolerate pre-exercise fuel. Because athletes vary in their ability to tolerate pre-exercise food, you need to experiment during training to learn which foods—and how much of them—

work best for your body. Some popular choices include oatmeal, cereal with lowfat milk, bananas, canned peaches, energy bars, bagels, and pasta. Avoid large, hard-to-digest, fatty meals, such as burgers and fried chicken.

You should actually eat carb-based meals *every day* so you can train at your best; this will help you compete at your best. The day before an event, enjoy tried-and-true carb-based meals that digest well, such as spaghetti with tomato sauce (and a few meatballs) or stir-fried chicken and veggies with lots of rice. Your body will have adequate time to digest the pasta or rice and store it as glycogen in your muscles.

The morning of the event (such as a 9:00 a.m. soccer game), plan to eat a light breakfast (cereal, bagel) by 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. and/or a comfortable pre-exercise snack (energy bar, banana). This food helps maintain a normal blood sugar level and enhances your endurance. Before an afternoon competition, eat a hearty breakfast and a comfortable lunch (soup, sandwich). Before an evening event, enjoy a hearty snack (bagel and peanut butter), if not an early dinner.

FLUIDS: Just as a lack of carbohydrates can hurt athletic performance, so can a lack of fluids. To prevent yourself from becoming dehydrated, drink fluids before, during and after strenuous exercise. To tell if you’ve had adequate fluids, monitor your urine. It should be pale yellow (like lemonade), not dark (like apple cider). You should need to urinate every two to four hours.

Water is fine for exercise that lasts less than an hour, particularly if you have enjoyed a pre-exercise snack to fuel your workout. If you are exercising for more than an hour, a sports drink *during* exercise offers energizing carbohydrates that enhance stamina and endurance. After exercise, your body recovers best with water+carbs+a little protein to help rehydrate, refuel and repair muscles. Two popular recovery options that offer water+carbs+protein are chocolate milk and flavored yogurt. If you have perspired heavily, replace the sodium lost in sweat with salty foods, such as soup, pretzels, spaghetti sauce, or salt sprinkled on the recovery meal.

RECOVERY FOODS: Muscles are most receptive to replacing depleted glycogen store within the hour after hard exercise. Plan ahead, so your recovery food will be readily available. If you eat a balanced breakfast, lunch or dinner soon after you finish training, you’ll easily consume protein and carbs, enhance your recovery, and reduce muscle soreness.

Remember: Only carbohydrates can quickly refuel your muscles and prepare you for tomorrow’s workout. Hence, your recovery meal should include—but *not* focus on—protein (protein shake/bar, eggs, chicken). Instead, choose carbs with protein: fruit smoothie; pizza with thick-crust and veggie toppings; pasta with a few meatballs; or a chicken dinner that includes lots of rice, bread, vegetables, fruit, and juice.

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