

Sports Nutrition

Sports Medicine Systems, Inc.

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THE PRE-COMPETITION MEAL

When it comes to pre-competition eating, each person has individual food preferences or aversions. Hence, no one single food or "magic meal" will ensure top performance. Whereas some athletes (runners or those in sports involving running and jumping) may prefer to eat nothing before competition, others (cyclists, skiers) may perform better after having eaten a light snack (50-200 calories) or small meal (300-500 calories). The following guidelines offer points to consider regarding your own personal pre-exercise eating program. Because each person is unique, you should experiment to learn which foods (if any), and how much of them, work best for *your* body.

- The goal of the pre-competition meal is to enhance stamina and endurance without causing any stomach discomfort. The pre-competition meal or snack helps to:

1. maintain a normal blood sugar and prevent performance problems associated with hypoglycemia, such as light-headedness, blurred vision, needless fatigue and indecisiveness.
2. settle the stomach, absorb some of the gastric juices and prevent you from feeling hungry.
3. provide energy to fuel your muscles.

Although eating too much food can have adverse effects (nausea, stomach cramps), so can eating too little (lack of energy). If you get very nervous, stressed or have a sensitive stomach, you may prefer to abstain completely from food. You should make a special effort to eat extra food *the day before* to be well fueled for the competition.

- Choose carbohydrates before an event because they digest quickly and are readily available for fuel. Some popular choices include cereal, bananas, bread, bagel, crackers and pasta. Protein-rich foods (eggs, tuna, steak) take longer to digest and may increase the need to urinate. Fats (fried foods, peanut butter, greasy burgers) stay longest in the stomach and may feel heavy and uncomfortable.

- Pay attention to meal timing. In general, you should allow 3-5 hours for a large meal to digest; 2-3 hours for a smaller meal, 1-2 hours for a blenderized meal (liquids are absorbed more rapidly than solid foods), .5-1 hour for a small snack. Always eat extra carbohydrates the day prior and do little or no exercise so your muscles can refuel. Before morning **events**, eat a hearty, high carbohydrate dinner and bed-time snack the prior night. That morning, eat a light meal (such as 1-2 slices of toast and/or cereal) as tolerated to stabilize your blood sugar, absorb some of the gastric juices and keep you from feeling hungry.

Before **afternoon events**, eat a hearty breakfast and a light carbohydrate-based lunch.

Before **evening events**, eat a hearty breakfast and lunch, then a light snack as tolerated 1-2 hours prior.

Some athletes break all the rules and enjoy a big meal with no problem within an hour of the event. Others can eat nothing for four hours prior. *You simply have to experiment during training* to determine what foods (if any) settle comfortably, when you should eat them (one, two or three hours prior?) and how much you can eat.

- Always eat familiar foods prior to competition -- don't try anything new! Experiment with new foods *during training* to determine if they settle well, cause "acid stomach", gas, heartburn, cramps or intestinal discomfort.

- Eat a high carbohydrate diet *every day* to prevent chronic glycogen depletion and ensure adequate glycogen replacement. One pre-event meal inadequately compensates for a poor training diet.

- When traveling, you might want to bring your favorite sports foods such as a tried-and-true cereal, muffin, fruit or sandwich. This way, you can worry less about fueling yourself and be free to focus on performing.

- The pre-competition meal may have a greater *psychological* than physiological value. For example, if you firmly believe that a steak dinner helps you perform best, then eat it even though this meal "breaks the rules" regarding pre-game suggestions! (But you should also experiment during training with pasta or another high carb, low fat choice to see if this more appropriate food settles better and offers an energy advantage.)

Sample high carbohydrate, low fat pre-competition food suggestions:

Breakfasts: cereal, lowfat milk, banana; toast, juice; muffin or bagel, yogurt; french toast or pancakes, syrup.

Lunches: sandwich with thick bread, little mayo; soup, crackers; thick-crust pizza (single cheese, no meat).

Snacks: crackers, bagel, toast, canned or fresh fruit, yogurt, small turkey sandwich, leftover pasta.

Dinners: spaghetti, tomato sauce; extra rice, noodles, potato, vegetables with small serving of chicken, fish.