

SPORTS NUTRITION TIPS

Without a doubt, *what* you eat and *when* you eat affects your athletic performance. A wisely selected sports diet helps you feel stronger, train harder and compete better. The following sports nutrition tips can help you eat to win.

FUEL: The best muscle fuels are carbohydrates -- either *simple sugars* (such as the naturally occurring sugars in fruits and juices) or *complex carbohydrates* (the starches in whole wheat bread, brown rice, bran cereal, oatmeal and other grains). These carbohydrates provide not only energy but also important vitamins and minerals. *Refined sugars* (i.e. soft drinks, candy) also fuel muscles but they lack the “spark plugs” that help your body’s engine run smoothly.

You store *only* carbohydrates - not protein or fats - in your muscles in a form of sugar called *glycogen*. During hard exercise, you burn this glycogen for energy. When you deplete your glycogen stores, as can happen during repeated days of hard training and a low carbohydrate diet, you feel overwhelmingly exhausted. Eating high carbohydrate foods (cereal, pancakes, bread, fruit, vegetables, potato, pasta) on a *daily* basis can help you train harder and compete better.

QUICK ENERGY: Eating lots of sweets and sugary foods for “quick energy” 15 to 60 minutes before you exercise may hurt your performance. Here’s 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 sugar from your blood into the muscles. Exercise, like insulin, also helps carry sugar into the muscles. The combined effect of insulin with exercise may 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 hungry, droopy and craving a quick energy boost prior to exercise, you don’t have to eat sugar for energy. A simple snack of crackers, fruit or a low fat granola bar can perk you up without risking negative hypoglycemic effects. Better yet, *prevent* the need for an energy boost! Simply eat a hearty breakfast and/or lunch that fuels you up earlier in the day so that you won’t be running on fumes later in the day. These meals will be digested in plenty of time for your afternoon or evening workout. You will be ready for action, rather than hungry and tired.

FLUIDS: Whereas lack of carbohydrates can hurt athletic performance, lack of fluids can endanger both performance and health. 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 sports drinks during exercise; water, sports drinks or juices afterwards. To tell if you’ve had adequate fluids, monitor your urine. You should void a large amount of clear-colored urine, *not* a small amount of a dark urine.

PRE-COMPETITION MEALS: Whenever possible, you should eat carbohydrate-rich meals *the day before* the competition. This allows you plenty of time to digest the carbohydrates and store the energy as glycogen in your muscles. Before a strenuous morning event (such as competing in a 9 AM road-race), you should also eat a light breakfast or small snack 1 to 3 hours prior to competing. This will help maintain a normal blood sugar level and enhance your stamina and endurance. Before an afternoon or evening competition, eat a hearty breakfast (cereal, pancakes, waffles, bagels), a lighter lunch (soup, sandwich) and a dinner or snack as tolerated. Since each athlete has different tolerances to pre-exercise food, you need to *experiment during training* to determine the quantity and type of food that works best.

Although many athletes believe they should exercise on an empty stomach, current research suggests that a pre-exercise snack actually can improve performance. Some popular choices include cereal with lowfat milk, 1 or 2 slices of toast or some plain crackers. Avoid large, fatty meals (the traditional steak-and-eggs breakfast) that tend to sit heavily in the stomach.

RECOVERY FOODS: You should eat carbohydrate-rich fluids and foods as soon as tolerable (at least within one to two hours after hard exercise) to replace the glycogen that you burned off. Muscles are most receptive to refueling at this time. A simple post-exercise refueler might be fruit juice -- a rich source of not only fluids and carbohydrates but also potassium and vitamins.

Remember that *only* carbohydrates quickly refuel your muscles and prepare you for tomorrow’s work out. Hence, resist the greasy burger with french fries for your recovery feast; instead choose carbohydrate-rich thick-crust pizza with single cheese and veggie toppings, or a dinner that focuses on potato, bread, vegetables, juices and other carbohydrates.