

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 be stronger, train harder, and compete better. The following sports nutrition tips can help you fuel optimally to reach your goals.

FUEL: Carbohydrate is best for muscle-fuel, particularly the natural sugars and starches in grain-foods (breads, oatmeal, rice, pasta, etc.) and all types of vegetables and fruits. Beans and legumes (lentils, chickpeas, pintos) are also rich in carbohydrate. Refined sugar (soda, gels, sport drinks, candy) can fuel your muscles, but they lack the vitamins and minerals that keep you healthy.

Your muscles store only carbohydrate—not protein or fat—in a form of sugar called glycogen. Your muscles burn glycogen for energy during hard exercise. When your glycogen stores get depleted, as happens if you eat too few carbohydrates during repeated days of hard training, you can end up feeling needlessly fatigued. By consuming wholesome grains, fruits, and veggies on a daily basis, you can reduce fatigue and enhance stamina.

Note: While carbs are best to fuel muscles, you need protein to build muscles. When planning your sports diet, include a protein-rich food at each meal, but make sure rice, pasta or grains are the main focus of the meal.

QUICK ENERGY: If you are hungry and need a pre-exercise energy boost, your body wants quickly digested carbs. Banana, crackers, or a granola bar can perk you up, as can a spoonful of honey. Better yet, prevent the need for an afternoon energy boost by eating a heartier breakfast and lunch that offers enough fuel so you won't be running on fumes after school or work. These meals will be digested by the time you workout. You will be ready for action, not droopy and dreading exercise.

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

PRE-EXERCISE MEAL: Many athletes think they should exercise with an empty stomach—and research suggests otherwise. Pre-exercise food actually improves athletic performance, to say nothing of enjoyment of exercise.

Part of your training is to train your intestinal tract to tolerate pre-exercise fuel. Because food tolerance varies from athlete to athlete, 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, cold cereal, banana, canned peaches, energy bars, bagels, and pasta. Avoid large, fatty meals (burgers, fried foods); they are harder to digest.

By routinely enjoying carb-based pre-exercise meals, you can train at your best—and this will help you compete at your best. The night before an event, enjoy the tried-and-true meals that digest well. Popular choices are spaghetti with tomato (and meat) sauce, and stir-fried chicken with rice and veggies. Overnight, your body will digest the pasta or rice and store it in your muscles as glycogen. The morning of the event (such as a 9:00 a.m. soccer game), plan to eat breakfast as tolerated (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, needed to feed the brain, fuel muscles, and enhance your endurance. Before an afternoon event, 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. You've had adequate fluids if your urine is pale yellow (like lemonade), not dark (like apple cider). You should be urinating every 2-4 hours. If you have to pee every hour, you can drink less!

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 will help maintain high energy.

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, you can replace the sodium lost in sweat by choosing salty foods (soup, spaghetti sauce), or by sprinkling salt on your next 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. You can simply back your workout into a meal, and enjoy a balanced post-exercise breakfast, lunch, or dinner. That way, you'll easily consume protein + carb, enhance recovery, and have less muscle soreness. Remember: Only carbohydrates (not protein) can quickly refuel your muscles and prepare you for tomorrow's workout. Choose more than just a protein shake, omelet, or chicken breast. Your muscles want three times more carbs than protein: fruit smoothie; French toast; chicken dinner (with rice, veggies, bread, fruit). Eat well and perform well!

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