

NUTRITION TIPS: SHOULD YOU EAT BEFORE COMPETING?

To Eat or Not to Eat: The Pre-Game Meal Question

What to eat before playing a competitive game? Food is fuel. As an athlete, you need to fuel your body appropriately—including pre-exercise. Just as you put gas in your car before you take it for a drive, you want to put fuel in your body before you embark on a busy day. Be as nice to your body as you are to your car.

That's the question athletes of all ages and abilities most commonly asked. While most athletes expect a simple response, such as "Eat a banana" or "Have a slice of toast," the answer is actually complex and depends on many factors. After all, we are each an experiment of one. The following information can help you figure out the best way to fuel your body before you step out on and compete.

Does what you eat within 30 minutes of training offer performance benefits?

Your body can actually digest and use the food you eat before you train as long as you are exercising at a pace you can maintain for more than 30 minutes. Research also suggests that eating a snack just five minutes before moderate exercise can improve performance compared to exercising on empty. Yet, if you will be doing intense exercise—a highly competitive game, sprint repeats, or heavy weight lifting session, you should experiment to determine the best time to eat. You will likely feel more comfortable allowing two or three hours for your pre-game food to digest and empty from the stomach.

Will pre-game food cause heartburn or nausea?

While many athletes can comfortably tolerate pre-game food, others experience stomach distress. If the food you eat within the hour "talks back to you," figure out:

- Does the discomfort happen if you allow two or more hours for the pre-game food to be digested?
- Does the type of food cause the problem? That is, do a few pretzels settle well but a cup of yogurt feels acidic?
- Did you eat too much? Would half a bagel with a skimming of peanut butter digest better than eating the whole bagel?
- Are you doing very high intensity work? If so, your stomach will shut down and your body will want to get rid of the contents...

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What if I train in the early morning, before my stomach is awake?

If you drag yourself out of bed to exercise at early o'thirty, before your body and your mind are fully awake, you might not want to eat much of anything. I know of many athletes who eat their breakfast the night before. That is, instead of eating a bowl of cereal at 5:30a.m., they enjoy it at 10:00pm, before going to bed. This food helps them wake up in the morning with a normal blood glucose (blood sugar) level, and provides energy for an enjoyable and effective workout.



What if pre-game food contributes to diarrhea and undesired pit stops?

Food generally takes one or two days to travel through the intestinal tract. Hence, an undesired pit-stop during a game might relate to food that you ate the day or two before. That is, if you ate an unusually large bowl of high-fiber bran cereal on Thursday when carbo-loading for the Friday game, you might end up wishing you'd carbo-loaded on low-fiber corn flakes or Rice Chex. Or maybe that bean burrito on Wednesday night caused the problem? You can try tracking your food and fiber intake, looking for suspicious patterns. In general, exercise speeds up intestinal motility. With time, most bodies can adjust if you train your intestines to handle pre-exercise food. For example, one athlete started by nibbling on one pre-exercise pretzel, and then two, and gradually built up his tolerance to the suggested 100 to 300 calories of carbs consumed within the hour pre-exercise. He enjoyed the benefits of feeling stronger at the end of his training sessions.

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Should I purposefully not eat before I exercise because I want to lose weight while I exercise?

An athlete reported she didn't eat before practices because she was exercising to burn calories. Why would she want to add calories to her diet? Wouldn't that defeat the main purpose of her workouts? Think again: If you consume 100 to 300 calories before you train, you will be able to run harder, longer, or at higher intensity and burn more calories than if you schlep through the session on fumes, with little enthusiasm or enjoyment. (Plus, you will not be as hungry afterwards and will be able to refrain from over-indulging.) Trust me, the plan to exercise-on-empty is hard to sustain; it is not fun.

Food is fuel. As an athlete, you need to fuel your body appropriately—including pre-exercise. Just as you put gas in your car before you take it for a drive, you want to put fuel in your body before you embark on a busy day. Be as nice to your body as you are to your car.

By eating nothing before my morning training, won't I burn more fat?

You may have heard you can burn more fat during low-level “fat burning exercise” if you do not eat beforehand. Yes, you might burn more fat than carbohydrates, but *burning* fat differs from *losing* body fat. You lose body fat when, at the end of your day, you have created a calorie deficit. That is, you will lose body fat (weight) if you have eaten only 1,800 calories by bedtime, even though you burned off 2,200 calories during the day.

By fueling pre-exercise, you can have a better workout—and perhaps burn more calories than if you were to run on fumes. To lose body fat, I suggest you fuel adequately by day, so you will have energy to enjoy an active lifestyle, and then lose weight at night by eating a lighter dinner. Fueling by day and dieting by night (so you lose weight when you are sleeping), is far preferable to restricting by day only to over-indulge at night due to extreme hunger.

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Can training on empty enhance endurance?

Some recent research suggests that highly competitive athletes might be able to enhance their performance if they train under-fueled a few times a week. These depletion workouts can alter muscle metabolism so that the muscles are able to compete better when fully fueled. If you want to “train low,” be sure to do your important high intensity workouts when you are well fueled. You cannot (enjoyably) exercise hard when you are running on fumes. Your performance will suffer unless you do some high quality hard runs when you are well fueled.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Performance starts with good nutrition. If you make the effort to train and compete, you might as well make the effort to eat well. No amount of training will outperform a bad athlete’s nutrition diet.

NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION

TAKING YOUR DIET TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Some athletes treat their bodies like temples — only eating and drinking the very best nutrients — others are a bit less careful and eat whatever they see. Does it really make a difference? Bottom Line? Good nutritional balance is important as well as eating without guilt.

Some athletes are still on the “see-food diet”. They see food and they eat it. Others are a bit more mindful about how they nourish their bodies.

Some athletes put thought into selecting high-quality foods that invest in good health, quick healing, and top performance. These athletes commonly report they have taken their diets to the *next level*. For some disciplined and dedicated athletes, the *next level* is a *perfect* diet with no sugar, no processed foods, no desserts, and no “fun foods.”

NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION



While aspiring to eat quality foods is certainly a step in the right direction, eating too healthfully can sometimes create problems if the food policy becomes a bit too zealous.

Is birthday cake really a bad-for-you food? I don't think so.

Is gorging on vegetables really best for your body? Not if your hands acquire an orange tinge from having eaten too many carrots, or if you experience recurrent diarrhea during exercise due to an excessively high-fiber diet.

A better goal than a *perfect* diet is an **excellent diet**. An excellent diet might be more balanced, enjoyable, and sustainable. Even birthday cake with refined sugar and saturated fat can fit into an excellent diet.



NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION

That is, the 2015 Dietary Guidelines allow for the inclusion of small amounts of so-called “imperfect” foods in your food plan:

- *10% of calories can come from refined sugar.*

That’s about 250 to 350 calories (60 to 90 grams) of sugar (carbohydrate) for most female and male athletes, respectively. This sugar fuels your muscles. Sports drinks and gels count as refined sugar.



- *10% of calories can from saturated fat that clogs arteries and is associated with heart disease*

For an athlete who requires at least 2,500 to 3,500 calories a day, consuming 250 to 350 calories (about 30 to 40 grams) of saturated fat per day, if desired, can fit within the saturated fat budget.

This means, from time to time, you can enjoy *without guilt* some “bad foods” such as bacon and chips.

NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION

An Athletes' Nutrition Note: One slice of bacon has about 1 gram saturated fat; a small bag of potato chips, about 3 grams.



Certainly there are healthier foods to eat than bacon and chips, but you want to look at your whole day's food intake—not just a single item—to determine the overall quality of your sports diet.

If 85% to 95% of your food choices are high quality, a little bacon or a few chips will not ruin your health forever.

Some athletes' deal with "unhealthy" foods by setting aside one day a week to be their cheat day. (Think *Faturday* or *Football Sunday*.) This well-intentioned plan can easily backfire. Most people don't over-eat/splurge until they have first been denied or deprived of a favorite food.

Hence, when the Perfect Diet starts on Monday, athletes can do a heck of a lot of "last chance" eating the days before starting their restrictive food plan... Rather than a Sunday splurge, let's say on bacon, you might want to enjoy just a few slices of bacon throughout the week.

This can curb cravings and dissipate the urge to splurge. There can be a "diet portion" of any food.

NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION



Athlete's Going to the Next Nutritional Level

For active players who want to take their diets to the next level with a sustainable plan, I offer these suggestions

- Evenly distribute your calories throughout the day.

Most FEMALE athlete's in general may need at least 2,400 to 2,800 calories a day; MALE athlete's in general may need 2,800 to 3,600+ calories a day.

This number varies according to how much you weigh, how fidgety you are, and how much you train.

Most "bad" food decisions happen at night, after your body has been under fueled during the day.

NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION

If you are “starving” before dinner, add a second lunch to curb your evening (over) eating. You will easily save your self from a lot of junk food at night. Trust me.

- **If your body requires 2,400 to 2,800 calories per day, this divides into 4 food buckets with about 600 to 700 calories every four hours.**

For example: 7:00 a.m., breakfast; 11:00, early lunch; 3:00 p.m., later lunch; and 7:00, dinner. Adjust the times to suit your schedule and divide the calories, if desired, into smaller snacks within that 4-hour window.

- Your breakfast food-bucket should be the same size as your dinner bucket; this likely means you’ll be eating a smaller dinner and a bigger breakfast.
- If you train in the morning, you may want to eat part of your breakfast calories before you run and the rest afterwards.



NUTRITION TIPS: NEXT LEVEL NUTRITION

Include in each food bucket at least three, preferably four, of these types of foods:

1 – Grain-based foods (about 150-250 calories/bucket), to fuel your muscles. Easy whole grains: whole wheat bread, oatmeal, and baked corn chips

2 – Protein-based foods (about 250 calories/bucket), to build and repair your muscles. Easy ready-made options include rotisserie chicken, deli turkey, hummus, tuna pouches, tofu, hard-boiled eggs, and nuts.

3 – Fruits and veggies (about 100-200 calories/bucket) for vitamins and minerals. Choose a variety of colorful fruits: strawberries, cherries, oranges, peaches, bananas, and blueberries. Also choose colorful veggies: dark green broccoli, peppers, spinach; orange carrots, sweet potato; red tomato, etc.

4 – Dairy/calcium-rich foods (about 100 calories/bucket) for bones and maintaining low blood pressure: Lowfat milk, (Greek) yogurt, cheese; soy alternatives—but please *not* rice or almond milk. They are equivalent to juice (not milk) with very little protein or nutritional merit.



By filling up on quality foods at breakfast, lunch #1, and Lunch #2, you will crave less “junk food” at night and may not even miss it. Your diet will easily rise to the next level, no sweat.