

Top 10 foods for runners

Foods for fuelling your running training

If you're a newcomer to running, it is essential that you have a healthy, balanced diet that will give you the ideal amounts of the correct nutrients to power your running. From choosing the correct proportion of protein, fats and carbohydrates to making sure you keep yourself hydrated during your training, running is a form of exercise that requires large reserves of both strength and energy. This is especially true for endurance athletes who can deplete both protein stores and energy reserves through poor diet and / or hard training.

Focusing on consuming the best foods to fuel your training and maintain strength will not only help you to feel better, but it will help you to perform better as well - which is a good incentive to eat sensibly and healthily! However, as so many of us have busy lives and as there is a wide variety of foods readily available, eating a balanced diet needs some thought and planning.

In this article I'll focus on the top ten runners' foods. So, if your running diet needs an MOT, why not read on? T

Which are the ideal foods for runners to eat?

If you ask a runner what the best food is to fuel their training, nine times out of ten the answer will be 'pasta'. **Pasta is many runners' preferred food and is ideal starchy carbohydrate for fuelling your runs and races, as it will give you unprocessed, slow-release energy, especially the wholegrain variety.** This type of energy is especially suitable for when you plan to run in endurance events such as marathons.

Pasta on its own won't make for a balanced running diet, though. The most common error that runners tend to make is focus too much on fuel and consequently neglect rebuilding and repair, which required adequate protein intakes. As you run, each of your footsteps can damage blood cells and cause microscopic damage to your muscles. However, adhering to **a nutrition plan which includes good-quality protein - for example that found in fish, lean meat, dairy foods and eggs - is most likely to ensure that your muscles stay in great condition.** In other words, protein is an essential part of your diet.

Fats are also very important and are regularly overlooked as a necessity by runners who focus on low-fat foods primarily. The good fats such as Omega 3 and mono-unsaturated fats provide essential fat-soluble vitamins and are also an energy source. Omega 3 fats especially are vital to keep inflammation under control. These good fats are found in oily fish, fish oils, nuts, seeds, olives, olive oil and avocados.

Additionally, your hydration needs as a runner are greater than those of a relatively inactive person and you are more likely to require food while you're 'on the go' – so both **snacks and fluids are essential as well.**

If you put all of the above elements – Carbohydrates, Protein, Fats, snacks and fluids - together, you'll have the top ten foods for runners!

Top 10 runners' foods

- **Pasta.** We have already talked about pasta, but in terms of your running diet it is still a great place to start. **Pasta parties before races are popular** for a good reason: if you are planning to compete in an event such as a marathon, pasta may make all the difference between 'hitting the wall' and going straight through it! Easily digestible and very varied in form, pasta can provide **slow-release energy** - which is precisely what a marathon runner requires. Even if your preferred event isn't a marathon, pasta is still a very good staple to eat - and put together with protein such as tuna or lean mince, vegetables and some olive oil it's an ideal runner's meal for refuelling.
- **Bananas.** An original snack food, bananas are readily available, require no preparation, and are a healthier alternative to high – sugar sweets and fast foods. Bananas are ideal for **refuelling rapidly** and come in their own biodegradable wrappers! For slow-release energy, choose a greener banana, but if you want more of a speedy energy 'hit' then eat a browner, riper fruit, because the difference in colour means the banana will have more **fruit sugar**, which will make it better as a post-training snack. Bananas can cause digestive upset in some people if eaten before or during a run so always experiment to see what suits you.
- **Porridge.** The number one food for breakfast, porridge essentially contains unprocessed oats and virtually nothing else. The very best type to choose are pinhead oats which are unprocessed. They do require a soaking however and take a little longer to cook but the result is vastly superior in terms of nutrition. If you make porridge with **low-fat milk or half milk and half water** it will give you the **ideal mix** of fibre, protein and slow-release energy. Whether you are consuming it before a race, before a training run or - even better - every day as your first meal, you won't do better than having the original breakfast food to help you get going every morning. Be wary of **porridge look-alikes**, however, such as instant varieties or oat-type cereals, as although they're a much healthier choice than many cereals that are laden with sugar, they are still a less suitable option to go for in comparison to pure, simple porridge.
- **Other breakfast cereals.** Second best to porridge but still very good foods for runners are other cereals such as whole grain **wheat biscuits and sugar-free muesli**. Provided you look at the ingredients list first and check for added fat and sugar, there are many cereals that can be eaten as great foods prior to an event. **Avoid sugar-coated cereals** and most of the types that are marketed primarily towards children, however, as in terms of nutrition they are very poor and won't prepare you well in the morning before a training run or race. Home made muesli is ideal and very simple to make by just combining a variety of flaked grains such as wheat, barley, rye and oats and adding your own favourite chopped dried fruits and nuts.
- **Water.** Despite not technically being a 'food', water is an essential part of everyone's diet - and runners especially. As a runner, you will lose a lot of fluid via **sweating** and on your breath - so even in colder weather you'll still have to make sure you **hydrate** well. You must try to continually top up your fluid levels while you are running - and consuming water is the simplest way of doing this. Drinking at least two litres a day needs to be your basic aim, or more than this in hotter weather and on days when you train.
- **Sports drinks.** These are sometimes seen by runners as 'the enemy', but they should have a place in your running nutrition plan. As well as fuelling your running

during long distance races, a glucose drink is an ideal food to have post training. The **first 15 minutes** after you finish your exercise is the '**golden window**' in **which to refuel**, as this is when your body will be the most receptive to restocking your fuel stores and will be able to do so at a quicker rate than usual. If you have a glucose drink just after you finish running, you can optimise your refuelling in the golden window, and also start your re-hydration at the same time! Remember concentrated glucose drinks can cause tummy upsets when taken on board during a run or a race as the stomach cannot digest or absorb the sugars fully. It can often be better to go for a more dilute concentration when using a sports drink during a race.

- **Protein Drinks.** These can be a very useful addition to any runners diet especially the slow-releasing Caesin Protein drinks. Many runners typically dont consumer enough protein in their diets, particularly females, and protein drinks can fill this gap. They are also a very useful recovery food and a source of good quality protein and calcium for vegetarian athletes.
- **Lean meat.** By steering clear of processed cuts of meat and focusing on lean, good quality meat you will provide your body with the needed building blocks for repair. If you're a runner who does a lot of training, you may need to eat up to 1.5g of protein per pound of bodyweight per day - which is a great deal to get through, so you will have to monitor your protein intake carefully and keep it at the right level.
- **Oily fish** These include Salmon, Trout, Fresh (not canned) tuna, Sardines, Mackerel, Herring and Kippers. The latter 4 can be canned or smoked. These fish contain Omega 3 fats which are invaluable for all runners. Aim to include some **protein with every meal**, and concentrate on meat or fish over vegetable proteins as animal proteins are complete - i.e. they contain all the **amino acids** needed by your body - whereas vegetable proteins are incomplete and don't contain some of the amino acids. Vegetable proteins consequently have to be consumed in the correct combination at the same time as other foods for your body to be able to use the protein effectively. i.e. Beans (legumes) and Grains.
- **Fruit and vegetables.** Everybody should focus on getting a **minimum of five portions of fruit, vegetables and fresh salad greens every day** - but as a runner you should aim to eat even more than this, as your energy and overall nutritional requirements will be greater. Select colourful **varieties**, because these contain more **nutrients**, - e.g. Broccoli , spinach, dark green cabbage, peppers, carrots etc. Aim to eat as wide a variety of fresh produce every day and focus on fruit (especially berries) and vegetables that are in season as they contain higher levels of anti-oxidant nutrients.
Also, monitor how much fibre you eat, as otherwise you may find yourself going to the toilet when you want to be out running!

Time to check your running larder...

There are a lot of similarities between a normal healthy diet and a nutrition plan for a runner. If you wish to get the most out of your training, though, try to concentrate on a **healthy diet generally**, but monitor how much protein you eat and increase how much water you drink. These extra elements mean you will be better prepared, be able to recover more quickly, and avoid becoming over-fatigued, ill or injured.