

Top 10 nutrition tips for runners

The importance of an effective running diet

As a runner your energy requirements can be high – after all, you will typically burn an extra 100 calories for every mile that you run. To make sure you meet your running energy requirements, it is important to eat the correct fuel, eat it at the correct time and balance it with the other foods in your diet.

There's a lot more to good running nutrition than simply stocking up on carbohydrates – so to guide you through the sports nutrition maze, we have put together our top ten running nutrition tips, which will ensure that you are fuelling your body correctly to support your run training and racing.

This guide includes tips on **optimum timing of meals, smart snacking strategies, and fuelling on the go.**

Don't neglect protein in your running diet

It's a surprising fact that a runner in heavy training can need as much protein as a **strength athlete** who is trying to build muscle. Whether you are racking up the miles or the weights in the gym, your body is being stressed during the running training process and will need to **repair itself**. Runners will often train day after day without rest, and in so doing the muscle damage will become cumulative. To combat the effects of heavy run training and to help maintain muscle strength make sure that you eat **plenty of protein** – ideally around 1 to 1.5g per pound of bodyweight. Most often you will find recommendations would be for far less of an intake. Lack of protein in the diet can lead to weak muscles which are easily strained and injured.

Go for glucose directly after training.

Directly after a running training session, try to drink a glucose energy replacement drink within **15 minutes of exercising**. During this short 15-minute period, your muscles are most receptive to restocking with fuel – and a glucose drink is an ideal for this purpose, as it will rapidly enter the bloodstream and be absorbed, thus accelerating the recovery process. Additionally, because you are fuelling in liquid form, you are also **re-hydrating** – so it's doubly good for you! This is especially important for endurance athletes who will have severely depleted muscle and liver glycogen stores through long training runs and sessions. If you don't refuel correctly after training then your energy stores will not be replenished for the next workout.

Eat complex carbohydrates in your running diet

At times other than the first 15 minutes after your running session, concentrate on meals containing **complex carbohydrates such as wholegrain bread, pasta, rice and pulses together with a protein food such as meat, fish, eggs, cheese**. The carbohydrate / protein mix will release energy into the bloodstream at a slower rate, giving you sustained energy, which will help you avoid being tempted to snack on high calorie foods such as biscuits, sweets and chocolate. In addition the protein will aid muscle recovery.

Eat en route, during runs lasting over 90 minutes.

For a longer race or training run, mid-session refuelling can keep your **energy levels high** and help you through to the finish. One of the easiest ways to keep your energy levels topped up is to carry a couple of energy gels with you. Small and light, gels are **extremely portable** and contain **concentrated hits of both slow and rapid release running energy**. Always remember to consume one before a water station so that you can wash it down with approximately 250ml of water – this is to ensure the gel dilutes to

the correct consistency and can be absorbed quickly. A lot of athletes neglect to drink enough fluids when taking energy gels and so can suffer nausea and stomach cramps later in the race or run. The same is true for concentrated sports drinks, ideally dilute these with water to help their absorption. NEVER experiment in a race, try them out in advance on long runs and if in doubt on race day, stick to water.

Run or train on a full stomach where possible

Runners preparing for longer distance events such as the half and full marathon will typically do a long run on a Sunday morning when they have more free time. They will also often omit breakfast and set off very early so as not to take too much time out of the day. The problem here is that, having fasted all night, the runner will be embarking on a challenging run with only a **partially full fuel tank** – which is likely to find them out later into the run. The solution is to **eat breakfast before you set off** on your run (allowing sufficient time for digestion) so that you don't run out of energy. If breakfast proves too unpalatable try to have an easily digested snack **such as a slice of bread** or toast with some honey or banana or a yogurt with some dried fruit and nuts.

Don't neglect fats

Many athletes try to strip out as much fat as possible from their diet in an effort to reduce weight and also to pack in more carbohydrates. This is a mistake. A certain amount of fat is vital in the diet for fat soluble vitamins A and D, essential fatty acids and valuable Omega 3 oils. Mainly, athletes and people on a high carbohydrate diet tend to have an imbalance of Omega 6 fats. This imbalance can trigger off inflammatory responses in the body leading to muscle and tendon inflammation, infections and low immunity. Lack of fat in the diet also slows the metabolism and leads the body to store fat more readily from carbohydrates rather than burning them for energy or storing them as glycogen. Aim for Omega 3 fats in the diet from oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, kippers. Oils from flax seeds, hemp seed, olives, olive oil, avocado are also valuable sources of healthy fats when taken in conjunction with the oily fish.

Eating healthy snacks will help your run training

When you run regularly, in addition to your generally higher calorie requirements you will find that your metabolic engine (the speed at which you burn calories whether you are exercising or not) increases. To avoid energy lows throughout the day, make sure you keep a **selection of healthy snacks to hand** so you can keep your energy levels topped up. Good snack choices include **fruit, sandwiches, fruit smoothies, fresh unsalted nuts, live yogurt, mixed seeds**. By avoiding energy lows resulting from low blood sugar, you will have more energy for everyday activities and will keep your muscles and liver primed for your next training session.

Don't neglect all your favourite foods

For your pre-race or training meals and your fuel supply during a race, experiment with what you enjoy, what you find palatable and what works best for you. One of the best pre-race meals is **porridge**: with its blend of low fat and unprocessed complex carbohydrate, it makes a great runner's meal. If you don't enjoy porridge, choose something that you do like instead that gives you **similar fuelling benefits**. Experiment with different types of foods until you find the ones that are right for you. Often runners can do well on a liquid meal such as a smoothie made with milk, fruit and perhaps an egg. If you do this, your performance can improve simply because you enjoy the balanced meal that you consume!

Don't overdose on cheap health supplements

During your running training, your body's requirements for all nutrients (including vitamins and minerals) will increase. However, it is a mistake to substitute good nutritional practice for supplements in order to maintain your intake of the necessary vitamins and minerals. Instead, look to eat a non-processed, whole-food diet, containing as much fresh produce as possible – and try to eat a wide a range of different produce each day. This way you are giving your body the best opportunity to get the **necessary vitamins, minerals and trace elements** that it needs, without over-relying on pills. Any supplementation should be seen as an insurance policy or as an aid to a balanced diet rather than a substitute. Always get nutritional advice before taking supplements as many many people take them incorrectly which can cause an imbalance of nutrients in the body.

Timing of meals around running is very important

It's not just *what* you eat that's important – it's also *when* you eat it. Eating too close to a run training session or allowing too long a gap between your last meal and your workout will result in impaired performances. Similarly, not refuelling after your run will result in fatigue, slower recovery and subsequent reduced performances. Allow for a **two-to-three-hour gap between eating and running** – and, after refuelling with a glucose drink following your training session, eat a more substantial meal containing both complex carbohydrate and protein (for repair) ideally within 1 to 2 hours of finishing. This way you will **optimise your recovery** in readiness for your next session. Many runners fail to do this and indeed will often avoid an evening meal after a session feeling it is too late. However, runners always need to refuel properly after a session no matter how late in the day this might be.

Always consider your specific nutritional running needs. Running nutrition differs slightly from the requirements of less active people, because as a runner you need to eat **more carbohydrate for fuel**, more **protein** for repair, the **correct balance of fats** and more food as a whole. Additionally, you need to carefully consider when to eat your meals and snacks so that your fuel tank doesn't run low and affect your training – and also what types of food you need to eat in order to **optimise your performances**. Stick to the top ten nutrition tips and your nutrition plan will be healthy, balanced and in tune with your running.

Good Luck.