

SportsNutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

Once upon a time, warriors (the original athletes) ate lions' hearts. Today, athletes seek out energy drinks and protein shakes. Clearly, times have changed! In case you are wondering what else is old—and new—when it comes to sports nutrition, I've compiled this update to resolve confusion and help you fuel for success.

OLD: The lighter you are, the better you will perform.

NEW: The athlete who is genetically lean and eats enough to have well-fueled muscles has an advantage over the athlete who is genetically heavier and has to skimp on food to maintain an unnaturally low weight. Research indicates elite swimmers who restricted calories in the pursuit of thinness lost speed (but not body fat) during a 12-week training cycle, while those who ate adequately swam faster.

OLD: Female athletes who train hard and have too little body fat will stop having regular menstrual periods.

NEW: Lack of fuel, not lack of body fat, tends to determine if a female athlete's body will menstruate normally. That is, many very lean female athletes do have regular menses. Although they may have very low body fat, they eat enough to support both their exercise and normal body functions.

OLD: Eat fat, get fat.

NEW: Yes, excess calories of dietary fat can easily convert into body fat. But healthful fats (i.e., nuts, olive oil, avocado, salmon) are an important part of a sports diet; they help reduce inflammation. Athletes also need dietary fat to absorb important vitamins, including A, D, E, and K. Fat also fuels the muscles; small amounts of fat get stored within the muscles and can enhance stamina and endurance. Research suggests runners had more endurance when they switched from a very low fat to a moderate fat diet.

OLD: If you want to lose weight, you need to go on a diet.

NEW: Diets do not work. If diets did work, then everyone who has ever been on a diet would be lean. Not the case. Rather than going on a diet, try to make just a few basic changes, such as 1) choose fewer processed snacks in wrappers and instead enjoy more fruit (fresh or dried) and nuts, and 2) get more sleep. Lack of sleep can contribute to not only weight gain but also reduced performance.

OLD: The recommended protein allowance for athletes is the same as for non-athletes.

NEW: The current RDA for protein (0.8 gram/kg body weight) is less than the 1.2 to 1.7 grams protein/kg recommended for athletes. Most athletes eat that (plus more) as a part of their standard meals, so you unlikely need protein supplements. You do want to distribute your protein intake evenly throughout the day, and not pile it all into dinner.

OLD: Slabs of roast beef help build bigger muscles.

NEW: Because the body can utilize only about 20-25 grams of protein at one dose, you won't build bigger muscles by eating jumbo portions of beef in one sitting. Your better bet is to cut that slab of meat into four pieces. Enjoy those deck-of-cards-sized pieces at least every four hours, so you get 20-25 grams of protein at each meal and afternoon or

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evening snack. Weight lifting—not eating excessive protein—triggers muscles to grow bigger. To have the energy needed to lift heavy weights, you want meals based on grains, fruits and veggies (with protein as the accompaniment). Carbs fuel the muscles; protein helps build muscles.

OLD: Don't drink coffee before exercise; it is dehydrating.

NEW: Pre-exercise coffee is not dehydrating and it can actually enhance performance. Caffeine boosts alertness and reaction time, as well as makes the effort seem easier so you work harder without feeling the extra effort. If you are sensitive to caffeine (a mugful gives you a "coffee stomach" and the jitters), you'll be better off abstaining. But athletes who enjoy drinking coffee generally feel positive benefits.

OLD: Energy drinks contain magical ingredients, like taurine.

NEW: The magical ingredients in energy drinks are caffeine and sugar. Although taurine has been reported to enhance performance, the limited research was done on rats. Newer research suggests taurine offers no ergogenic benefits. To save money, simply add a heaping tablespoon of sugar to your coffee. You'll get the same boost. Better yet, eat wisely and sleep more; you won't need an energy drink...

OLD: Don't eat before or during exercise. The food just sits in the stomach and does not get digested.

NEW: You can digest food during exercise as long as you are working at a pace you can maintain for >30 minutes. Fitness exercisers can benefit from a small pre-exercise snack as tolerated (such as a banana, granola bar, or packet of oatmeal) to get their blood sugar on the upswing. Endurance athletes who exercise for more than 90 minutes will benefit from both pre-exercise fuel and then carbs during the extended workout. The target is 250-350 calories of carbohydrates per hour. That's more than just a swig of sports drink! Be sure to practice fueling prior to and during exercise, so you can learn what works and what doesn't.

OLD: Orange slices are a perfect half-time snack for youth sport.

NEW: While chomps, gels, and sports drinks may seem better than cut-up oranges and water for half-time fueling at youth sports events, kids actually should be taught that natural foods work well. Orange slices, pretzels, and water provide more nutrients and electrolytes (a.k.a sodium and potassium) than sports drinks. Even adult athletes can do well with real foods. While elite athletes might prefer engineered products during intense exercise, most of us can perform just fine with real food. Go back to the OLD, please!

OLD: Refuel as soon as possible after you workout.

NEW: If you do exhausting workouts twice a day, you'll benefit from eating soon after the first bout of exercise to fuel-up for the next bout. But if you are a fitness exerciser, simply back your workout into the next meal. You'll have plenty of time to recover before your workout the next day.

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