

Pre-Race Fuel

This is the second article in a 4-part series on how to manage and optimize your nutritional intake prior to, during, and after competition to set the stage for a strong performance and recovery.

Race day has arrived...and after months of preparing for this important event, the pre-race meal is arguably the most significant meal we eat, next to what is consumed immediately after exercise (more on that in article number 4). Knowing what to eat, how much, and when to eat prior to your race will greatly affect your performance and will ensure that all your hard training delivers maximum results on race day.

Let's start by examining **why we eat the pre-race meal**. The main reason is to top off your liver glycogen stores which your body expended while you slept. Provided you properly recovered with carbohydrates and protein after your last workout, your muscles, inactive during the night, will remain fully loaded with glycogen, the body's main source of energy when exercise begins. If you didn't, it's too late now and eating right before your race will only hurt your performance.

The pre-race meal should include easily digested foods **rich in complex, starchy carbohydrates**, as well as a **small amount of protein, little fiber**, and **minimal fat and simple sugar**. This will supply your body with the nutrients required to prolong endurance for an extended period of time. Then, hydrate well with water up to 30 minutes before the event – 10-12 oz hourly (24 to 30 oz total).

The **size of your pre-race meal** will depend on your body size, the duration of your race, and the timing of your meal. Sports nutrition expert Dr. Bill Misner advises that a meal of 200 to 400 calories is adequate before training or racing.

When you eat your pre-exercise meal is perhaps the most important consideration. **The key is to eat your pre-race meal 3 to 4 hours prior to the event!** This allows enough time for your body to fully digest the meal and avoid intestinal distress. Also, compelling research shows that eating complex carbohydrates within 3 hours of exercise

raises blood sugar causing excess insulin release. This promotes faster muscle glycogen depletion and inhibits fat utilization for energy, disrupting your primary long-distance fuel availability and negatively affecting performance. Completing your pre-race fueling 3 or more hours prior to start time allows enough time for insulin and blood sugar levels to normalize.

The **exception** to this rule is during training or races lasting 90 minutes or less. Consuming calories within an hour or two prior to the start, you will increase the rate at which your glycogen is burned, but that's what you want in a short race, and it may in fact advance performance. Glycogen depletion is not an issue at this distance when the race is over within 90 minutes.

10 Minutes before the Start – If you feel you must absolutely eat right beforehand, take in 100 to 200 calories (e.g. a few oz of sports drink or a gel) during the final 5 to 10 minutes before starting. By the time these carbohydrate calories are digested, there isn't enough time for the body to respond by secreting insulin because you will have started exercising already. So, you will have prevented glycogen depletion and also given yourself an energy boost.

Pre-race meal suggestions in the 200 to 400 calorie range:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup cooked oatmeal topped with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup berries, 10 almonds, drizzle of maple syrup; 1 medium apple spread with $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp natural nut butter
- 1 bagel and 1 medium banana
- 2 6-inch pancakes topped with 4 tbsp unsweetened applesauce and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup low-fat yogurt
- Protein smoothie: 1 cup unsweetened almond milk, 1 medium banana, 1 cup berries, 1 tbsp flax oil, 1 scoop protein powder of choice
- Energy bar: 1 Vega Whole Food Vibrancy Bar or 1 Vega Whole Food Energy Bar or 1 Organic Food Bar™

Practice the above recommendations during training before workouts to discover what pre-exercise meals work best for you, follow the

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same fueling plan on race day, and then enjoy your improved performance!