



Food for thought

Fuelling your workouts effectively



Getting your pre-exercise nutrition right is as important as putting the right fuel in your car if you want to consistently perform at your best, says Chinnor-based personal fitness trainer, Hilary Westall. Get it wrong and a dip in energy levels may leave you struggling to complete your planned training session, resulting in a less than satisfactory performance. Get it right and you'll have plenty of energy to maximise your workouts – and ultimately your results.

Your body's main fuel supply comes from glycogen, which is what the body converts food into over several hours after eating. The best source of glycogen is carbohydrate. It takes 24 hours for your body to refill depleted muscle glycogen stores, so what you eat the day before a training session does matter - you can't rely on what you eat just before a workout as your body won't have enough time to convert this food into glycogen. For someone exercising around five to seven hours per week, a daily diet that provides 5-6g/kg/day of carbohydrates (so 300-360g per day for someone weighing 60kg) will keep glycogen levels sufficiently topped up. As an example, two slices of wholemeal bread provide around 38g carbohydrate; two Weetabix provide 25g carbohydrate.

Eating before a workout

The main purpose of your pre-workout meal or snack is to ensure your blood sugar levels remain stable during exercise. It also helps prevent you feeling hungry and reduces the risk of getting a stitch.

You should aim to eat something 2-4 hours before a workout, which allows enough time for it to be digested. Try not to go longer than four hours without something. The best foods to eat are slow burning, or low-GI (Glycaemic Index) foods. These foods produce a gradual rise in blood sugar levels and sustain your energy levels for longer and have also been found to help you burn more fat. High-GI foods send your blood sugar level up quickly, which then drop back down and can leave you feeling drained. Always try to combine some protein, which is essential for muscle growth and repair, with carbohydrate.

Examples of low to medium GI meals and snacks can be seen in the table below:

Pre-exercise meals	Pre-exercise snacks
Wholemeal sandwich filled with chicken and salad; cheese; egg; peanut butter	Small handful of dried apricots with small handful of almonds
Jacket potato with beans, cheese, tuna or chicken	2-3 oatcakes or rice cakes with cottage cheese or peanut butter
Pasta with tomato-based sauce	Large glass of chocolate milk or smoothie
Wholegrain cereal or porridge with milk	1-2 pots fruit yogurt
Chicken and vegetable stir-fry with brown rice	1 small energy bar or cereal bar

Running on empty

There is a great deal of debate and misunderstanding over the effects on fat burning when exercising in a fasted state. Whilst it is true that your body will burn fat more readily if you exercise on an empty stomach (for example, first thing in the morning before eating breakfast), you are more likely to experience symptoms of low blood sugar levels, such as lethargy, light-headedness and loss of concentration, all of which will prevent you from working out as effectively. If you can eat something, such as a banana with some orange juice, or a cereal bar, you will be able to work out harder, and for longer – thereby burning more energy (and calories) than if you'd skipped your breakfast. Also, when reserves of glycogen run low, the body turns not just to fat but to protein as its energy source and if you start so you can literally burn away precious muscle fibre that you want to maintain at all costs! In conclusion then, and especially if you are looking to improve strength, endurance or performance, it is definitely not advisable to train when running on empty. And if you really can't face any food, at least try for some liquid energy such as diluted fruit juice, a smoothie, flavoured milk or an energy drink.

Hydration

You need to be properly hydrated before and during exercise, as even mild dehydration will put undue stress on your heart and lungs as your body

cannot cool itself down – which will stop you from training as hard and for as long. To avoid this, it's important to keep hydrated throughout the day, drinking more when it's hot and on your training days. Go for the little-and-often rule, as drinking large volumes at once makes you go to the toilet more so you lose more fluid! And aim to drink before you get thirsty, as this means you are already dehydrated. In the 2-4 hours before a workout, drink 2-4 glasses of water divided into several smaller amounts.

It's easy to let your nutritional needs slip when time is short, or you don't have access to food when you need it. However, with a little forward planning and a greater awareness your body's energy requirements, you really can make a big difference to your training with well-timed, well-chosen meals and snacks. You wouldn't expect your car to go 20 miles with only 10 miles left in the tank – and you shouldn't expect your body to do so either.

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