

STRATEGIES TO EAT BETTER

Nancy Clark, MS RD CSSD January 2008

More often than not, athletes ask me “What is a well balanced diet? What should I be eating to help me perform at my best?” They feel overwhelmed by the seemingly endless list of nutrition don'ts. Don't eat white sugar, white bread, processed foods, fast foods, french fries, soda, salt, trans fats, butter, eggs, red meat... You've heard it all, I'm sure.



If you want to eat better but don't know where to start, here's a nutrition strategy that can help you fuel your body with a well balanced sports diet. The suggestions guide you towards an eating style that's simple and practical, yet can effectively help you eat well to perform well, despite today's bewildering food environment.

- **Eat at least three kinds of nutrient-dense food at each meal.** Don't eat just one food per meal, such as a bagel for breakfast. Add two more foods: peanut butter and low fat milk. Don't choose just a salad for lunch. Add grilled chicken and a crusty whole grain roll. For dinner, enjoy pasta with tomato sauce and ground turkey. Two-thirds of the meal should be whole grains, vegetables, and fruits, and one-third low fat meats, dairy, beans or other protein-rich foods.

Too many athletes eat a repetitive menu with the same 10 to 15 foods each week. Repetitive eating keeps life simple, minimizes decisions, and simplifies shopping, but it can result in an inadequate diet and chronic fatigue. The more different foods you eat, the more different types of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients you consume. A good target is 35 different foods per week. Start counting!

- **Eat “closer to the earth”** by choosing more foods in their natural state. For instance, choose oranges rather than orange juice; orange juice rather than sports drink; whole-wheat bread rather than white bread; baked potatoes rather than french fries. Foods in their natural (or lightly processed) state offer more nutritional value and less sodium, trans fat, and other health-eroding ingredients. You'll find these foods along the perimeter of the grocery store: fresh produce, lean meats, low fat dairy, whole grain breads. If possible, choose locally grown foods that support your local farmer and require less fuel for transportation to the market.

- **Fuel your body on a regular schedule, eating even-sized meals every four hours.** For example, a reducing diet (non-dieters need another 100-200 calories per meal) might be:

Breakfast (7-8:00 am): 500 calories (cereal + milk + banana)

Lunch (11-noon): 500 calories (sandwich + milk)

Lunch #2 (3-4:00): 400-500 calories (yogurt + granola + nuts)

Dinner (7-8:00 pm): 500-600 calories (chicken + potato + greens)

This differs from the standard pattern of skimpy 200 to 300 calorie breakfasts and lunches that get followed by too many calories of sugary snacks and super-sized dinners.

Depending on your body size, each meal should be the equivalent of two to three pieces of pizza; that's about 500 to 750 calories (or 2,000 to 3,000 calories per day). Think about having four “food buckets” that you fill with 500 to 750 calories from at least kinds of foods every four hours. Even if you want to lose weight, you can (and should) target 500 calories at breakfast, lunch #1 and lunch #2.

Those meals will ruin your evening appetite, so you'll be able to "diet" at dinner by eating smaller portions. (Note: Most active people can lose weight on 2,000 calories, believe it or not!)

Whatever you do, try to stop eating in a "crescendo" (with meals getting progressively bigger as the day evolves). Your better bet is to eat on a time-line and consume 3/4 of your calories in the active part of your day; eat less at the end of the day. One runner took this advice and started eating his dinner foods for lunch, a sandwich for lunch #2 (instead of snacking on cookies) and then had soup and a bagel for dinner. He enjoyed far more energy during the day, was able to train harder in the afternoon, and significantly improved his race times.

- **Honour hunger.** Eat when you are hungry, and then stop eating when you feel content. Hunger is simply a request for fuel; your body is telling you it burned off what you gave it and needs a refill. To disregard hunger is abusive. Just as you would not withhold food from a hungry infant, you should not withhold food from your hungry body. If you do, you will start to crave sweets (a physiological response to calorie deprivation) and end up eating "junk".

While counting calories is one way to educate yourself how to fill each 500-calorie "bucket" (for calorie information, use food labels, www.fitday.com, and www.calorieking.com/foods), you can more simply pay attention to your body's signals. Keep checking in with yourself, "Is my body content? Or, does my body need this fuel?" If confronted with large portions that would leave you feeling stuffed, consider letting the excess food go to waste, not to "waist."

- **Think moderation.** Rather than categorize a food as being good or bad for your health, think about moderation, and aim for a diet that offers 85 to 90 percent quality foods and 10 to 15 percent foods with fewer nutritional merits. Enjoy a foundation of healthful foods, but don't deprive yourself of enjoyable foods. This way, even soda pop and chips, if desired, can fit into a nourishing food plan. You just need to balance the "junk" with healthier choices throughout the rest of the day. That is, you can compensate for an occasional greasy sausage and biscuit breakfast by selecting a low-fat turkey sandwich lunch and a grilled fish dinner.

- **Take mealtimes seriously.** If you can find the time to train hard, you can also find the time to fuel right. In fact, competitive athletes who don't show up for meals might as well not show up for training. You'll lose your edge with hit or miss fuelling, but you'll always win with good nutrition!

Nancy Clark, MS, RD, CSSD (Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics) counsels both casual and competitive athletes in her practice.