Sports Nutrition for the Runner

What you eat and drink can have a huge effect on your health, how you feel, and of course how you perform. Here are some sports nutrition tips to help you fuel your mind and body.

Carbohydrates

There has been a lot of negativity around carbs lately. Don't let this sway you from eating carbs though. There are good carbs and bad carbs. You should try and limit simple carbs like sugar and high fructose corn syrup and foods that contain them. These are found in the oh so good, but oh so bad stuff like sodas, cookies and desserts. Simple carbs have a high glycemic index, which means they are broken down and absorbed into your system quickly, which can cause a spike in your blood sugar level. With the spike comes the low, which can make you feel tired and crummy. The exception is fruit, which technically has simple carbs in them, but they are filled with good vitamins and minerals. Complex carbs on the other hand, have a lower glycemic index and take longer to digest and absorb. This means it gets absorbed into your system over a longer period of time without that spike in your blood sugar level. Examples of good complex carbs are whole grains and starchy vegetables like potatoes and carrots (and no, french fries don't count). If you're looking to lose weight, then go ahead and cut out some carbs from your diet. However, if you're a serious runner, then carbs are your friends as this is the main source of your energy. Aim to get about 60% of your calories from carbs, the good kind.

Proteins

Proteins are made of amino acids and these are essential to repairing muscles, tendons, and ligaments. If you skimp too much on proteins, you may be depriving your body of the fuel it needs to repair itself. You should try and get about 1.5 grams of protein for every kilogram you weigh per day. Children and adolescents need closer to 2 grams per kilogram per day. Aim for about 20% of your calories from healthy proteins such as lean meats, eggs, tofu, nuts, legumes and fish.

Fats

Just like carbs, there are good fats and bad fats. Look for foods with either monosaturated or polyunsaturated fats. These can be found in olive oil, canola oil, flax seed oil, avocados, nuts, legumes and fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel and trout. Try to aim for 20% of calories from fat.

Nutrient timing

When you eat also has an impact on your performance. If you're planning on an intense workout or running session, you should try and plan your meal at least 3 hours before exercise. This will ensure that your body has had enough time to digest the food and help boost the glycogen/energy stores. The time after you exercise is important as well. This is called the recovery period, the time immediately after exercise when the body is depleted of energy and is starting to repair muscle. Ideally, you will want to eat within 60 minutes of an intense workout or run. This should consist of a snack with high carbs and some protein. Good examples are chocolate milk, yogurt with fresh berries, or a banana with peanut butter. This will help give your body what it needs to replace its energy stores and start repairing its muscles to ensure you're ready for the next day.

Lastly, don't forget to eat your colors (i.e. a wide variety of fruits and vegetables). There are a lot of vitamins and minerals that your body needs to stay healthy. If you eat your colors, you can probably pass on that multivitamin.
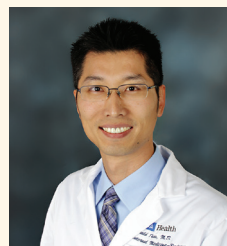
Ron Tsao, MD
Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, Sports Medicine

UCLA Health Redondo Beach
Phone: (310) 937-8555

Uclahealth.org/southbay