

Nutrition and Sports

Submitted by Joanne Knowlton
Nutrition Connections Program
UNH Cooperative Extension

--- Water, water everywhere... You can survive for a month without food but only for a few days without water.

Water is the most important nutrient for active people.

When you sweat, you lose water, which must be replaced. Drink fluids before, during, and after workouts.

Water is a fine choice for most workouts. However, during continuous workouts of greater than 90 minutes, your body may benefit from a sports drink, which has electrolytes and carbohydrates, two very important ingredients. Electrolytes are lost through sweating during workouts lasting several hours. Carbohydrates provide extra energy. The most effective sports drinks contain 15 to 18 grams of carbohydrates in every 8 ounces of fluid.

--- Rev up your engine with carbohydrates, your body's main source of energy.

Carbohydrates are sugars and starches, and they are found in foods such as breads, cereals, fruits, vegetables, pasta, and milk.

Sugars and starches are broken down by your body into glucose, which is used by your muscles for energy.

Sugars and starches have 4 calories per gram, while fat has 9 calories per gram. In other words, carbohydrates have less than half the calories of fat.

If you regularly eat a carbohydrate-rich diet, you probably have enough carbohydrates stored to fuel activity. Even so, be sure to eat a precompetition meal for fluid and additional energy. What you eat as well as when you eat your precompetition meal will be entirely individual.

--- Building bigger muscles... It is a myth that eating lots of protein and/or taking protein supplements and exercising vigorously will definitely turn you into a big, muscular person.

Building muscle depends on your genes, how hard you train, and whether you get enough calories.

The average American diet has more than enough protein for muscle building. Extra protein is eliminated from the body or stored as fat.

--- The importance of iron and calcium...

Iron supplies working muscles with oxygen. If your iron level is low, you may tire easily and not have enough stamina for activity. The best sources of iron are animal products, but plant foods such as fortified breads, cereals, beans, and green leafy vegetables also contain iron.

Calcium is needed for strong bones and proper muscle function. Lack of calcium can contribute to stress fractures and osteoporosis. The best sources of calcium are dairy products, but many other foods also contain calcium – salmon with bones, sardines,

collard greens, and okra, for example. In addition, some brands of bread, tofu, and orange juice are fortified with calcium.

--- A word about vitamins and minerals... Eating a varied diet will give you the vitamins and minerals you need for peak performance, but there are exceptions. These include active people who follow strict vegetarian diets, avoid an entire group of foods, or eat less than 1800 calories a day. A multivitamin and mineral pill may provide the missing vitamins and minerals.

--- What about your calorie requirements? Your calorie needs depend on your age, body size, sport and training program. Check your weight from time to time, to make sure you are not getting too many or too few calories. If you're keeping within your ideal weight range, you're probably getting the right amount of calories.

This article was based upon "Fast Facts About Sports Nutrition," a publication of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

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