

Nutritional Advice for Competitive Swimmers

All top elite athletes gain their success from a number of factors and one of these is nutrition. Without proper nutrition you will not reach your full potential. To get that extra edge a suitable diet is needed and many athletes follow specific dietary programs to make sure their diet is a healthy and one that will enhance their performance.

WHAT'S THE LINK BETWEEN WHAT YOU EAT AND SWIMMING?

Energy and being able to keep going are the most important factors in achieving your best performance. Our bodies create energy from the food we eat by breaking down the different components of food which contain carbohydrates, proteins and fats. Carbohydrates are the most important nutrients for swimmers as this is what makes energy in your body. During training, our body's energy stores empty after 90 minutes, therefore athletes need more carbohydrates than a normal person. A healthy diet is one that provides us with enough energy we need from the correct types of foods in the right amounts. A swimmer's diet is based on a healthy diet with a few differences. As a swimmer the role of your diet is not just to keep you healthy but also to meet the extra needs your body has due to the extra training you do. What you eat will affect your ability to train, recover between training sessions and compete. So to achieve a well balanced diet to lead a healthy life and to give you that extra edge for your swimming it is the basic nutrients that are important and the amounts and balances of these nutrients that you eat.

All foods give us energy and it is the most important consideration because if your body runs out of energy you will start to slow down in the pool and feel very tired. You are also still growing and your body uses a lot of energy just to do that, so that energy on top of the energy you need to swim and the energy you need to get you through a day at school means you need to be eating a lot!

CARBOHYDRATES

For swimming this is the most important nutrient because it is the easiest way to get the energy you need to move and swim faster. Carbohydrates come in two forms - simple and complex. Complex carbohydrates are the better source as they provide the best source of energy for exercise because the energy they give is released slowly throughout the day. The simple carbohydrates give you a quick energy burst. Carbohydrates should make up just over half of the food on your dinner plate.

FOOD SOURCES OF COMPLEX CARBOHYDRATES

Rice

Breakfast cereals

Pasta and noodles

Potatoes

Pizza bases

Crispbreads, oatcakes and rice cakes

Beans (inc baked)

Peas and lentils

FOOD SOURCES OF SIMPLE CARBOHYDRATES

Sugar/jam/honey/chocolate spread

Fruit (fresh, canned, dried & juice)

Chocolate and cereal bars

Sweets (jelly babies, jelly beans)

Cakes

Buns

Biscuits

Puddings

Yogurts

Soft Drinks

Sports Drinks

These are some of the types of carbohydrates that you need to be eating plenty of: bread, rice, pasta, potatoes and breakfast cereals. Other types of carbohydrates that can be useful to give you instant quick energy are called simple carbohydrates and are foods like honey, chocolate, biscuits and sweets. But these should only be eaten in small amounts.

TIPS FOR GETTING ENOUGH CARBOHYDRATE FOODS:

Base each meal around one of the following - rice, pasta, noodles, pizza, breads or potatoes

Eat puddings that contain a lot of carbohydrates - fruits, yogurts, or rice pudding

Snack on high carbohydrate foods and take these snacks to school and training

Have a carbohydrate rich snack after training

Drink juices or squash every time you eat.

You should avoid eating all your carbohydrates in one huge meal each day - this is not the best way to refuel your energy stores, meals should be spread out throughout the day.

Therefore top-ups with carbohydrate foods are important.

PROTEIN

The second aim in achieving a good athlete's diet is to eat the right amounts of protein. Protein can be found in foods such as meat, fish, peas, beans and dairy products i.e. cheese, eggs

This part of your diet is important because:

It helps repair your body after training

Helps you grow properly

Helps your muscles get stronger

Protein is not as important as carbohydrates for swimmers but you still need some protein foods in your diet every day.

Make sure the protein sources you eat are lean and low in fat. Cooking methods are also important. Try and opt for grilled or baked foods and avoid fried foods whenever possible.

FAT

Remember that high fat diets aren't good for anyone, especially swimmers. When you are training and competing eating a lot of fatty foods such as pies or sausage rolls can make you feel full and uncomfortable and can hamper your performance, this is especially important during competition. Another negative aspect of high fat diets is that the high fat foods make it difficult for you to meet the high carbohydrate requirements because you would usually choose fatty foods over carbohydrates. So keep the amount of fatty foods you eat down to a minimum.

FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

You should aim to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables per day. Fruit and vegetables give you all the vitamins and minerals your body needs to work properly and to its full potential. Calcium, iron and zinc are especially important for growth and to help your immune system fight off infections. A portion of fruit is an apple, 2 plums, a pear, glass of fruit juice for example. A portion of vegetables is two spoonfuls of peas or carrots, two - three florets of broccoli for example. Remember frozen vegetables also count.

FLUID

Contrary to popular belief swimmers do sweat. The atmosphere in most swimming pools is very hot and humid and these conditions can lead very easily to dehydration. So you are losing fluid and water all the time and you must replace it. Being dehydrated affects your coordination, concentration and reduces the length of time you can keep swimming for.

GOLDEN RULE: DRINKING LITTLE AND OFTEN AND BEFORE THIRST SETS IN IS THE KEY TO STAYING WELL HYDRATED

So make sure you drink before training and throughout the training session, always take your bottle on to the poolside and leave it at the end of the lane and take sips whenever you can. Carry on drinking after the session and make sure you have enough drinks with you. It is also especially important throughout a competition, even if you are just watching your other team mates swim.

Here's a sample menu for a day:

Drinking during and after training

Mid-morning snack

Light meal at lunchtime

Pre-training snack mid afternoon

Drinking during and after training

Dinner

Small snack before bed

SAMPLE DAYS MENU

BREAKFAST

Glass of fruit juice or piece of fresh fruit i.e. grapefruit

Breakfast cereal with semi skimmed milk 2 slices wholemeal toast with spread and jam/honey

Snack Fruit or yogurt or cereal bar

LUNCH

2 wholemeal rolls or sandwiches filled with lean meat, cheese, or tuna with salad and spread

Packet low fat crisps

Piece fruitcake

Yogurt

PRE-TRAINING SNACK

Breakfast cereal with semi skimmed milk

Crumpet/ toast/ raisin bread/ fruit loaf/ bagels with spread, jam, honey or peanut butter

POST TRAINING SNACK

2 biscuits i.e. digestives, slice raisin bread or cereal bar

Drink

DINNER

Lean meat or fish

Starchy carbohydrates - rice/ pasta/ potatoes/ noodles

Vegetables

Dessert - rice pudding/ fruit with ice cream

SUPPER

Toast with spread

Warm milky drink

So snacking is important.

What kinds of snacks are good for you?

Toast

Breakfast cereals

Teacakes, scones

Scotch pancakes

Malt loaf

Fruit

Dried fruit

Bread sticks/rice cakes / rusks

Energy bars

Popcorn

Twiglets

Milkshakes

Banana/jam/honey/chocolate spread sandwiches

Some examples of well-balanced snacks for swimmers include:

A piece of fruit and a tub of low fat yoghurt

Banana smoothie with low fat milk,

Chicken, ham, tuna or cheese sandwich on grainy bread

Bowl of breakfast cereal with low fat milk and banana

Homemade pizza on English muffin with cheese, ham and tomato

6-8 wheat crackers with low fat cheese and marmite

Homemade potato or sweet potato wedges with sweet chilli sauce

2 pieces of raisin toast and a low fat milk

Homemade fruit muffin and tub of yoghurt

Toasted sandwich with small tin of baked beans or spaghetti

Tub of yoghurt

Tortilla with peanut butter, carrot and sultanas

Banana bread and Low fat milkshake

Low fat ice cream

Fruit bun and glass of orange juice

Special K bar with a tub of yoghurt

SUMMARY

Overall a well-balanced diet with sufficient energy is the target with an extra emphasis on carbohydrates. Fluid is also a major factor and you should make sure you are always well hydrated.

GOOD NUTRITION WILL NOT MAKE YOU INTO A WORLD CLASS PERFORMER BUT BAD EATING HABITS MAY PREVENT YOU FROM REALIZING YOUR POTENTIAL AND REACHING YOUR GOALS

When preparing to compete at a swimming competition you need to pay careful attention to what you eat. Read on to find out what to eat the day before the event and during the day.

The Day Before

When competition time comes round, you'll have plenty on your mind already. So the day before the event, keep exercise to a minimum - if anything at all - and eat meals and snacks high in complex carbohydrates. You need to keep those glycogen stores topped up.

- Drink fluids little and often to stay properly hydrated.
- Eat little and often - every two to four hours to keep your blood sugar levels steady and fuel your muscles in preparation for your event.
- Avoid big meals or over-eating in the evening - this will almost certainly make you feel uncomfortable and lethargic the next day.
- Try to stick to familiar foods. Curries, spicy foods, baked beans and pulses (unless you are used to eating them) can cause gas and bloating, so avoid eating anything that may cause stomach discomfort the next day. It's best to stick to foods that you are familiar and compatible with.

The Morning of the Event

- Don't swim on empty. Even if you feel nervous, make breakfast happen. Stick to easily digested foods - cereal with milk, porridge, banana with yoghurt, some fruit or toast with jam.
- If you're really struggling, try liquid meals such as milkshakes, yoghurt drinks or a smoothie.
- It's a good idea to rehearse your competition meal routine in training so you know exactly what agrees with you.

Snacks between Heats

- Try to eat as soon as possible after your swim to give yourself as long as possible to recover if you have to swim again.
- High fat and simple sugar foods will do you no favours in competition - instead search out the complex carbohydrates again.
- If you can't stomach anything solid try sports drinks, flavoured milk or diluted juice that will help replenish your energy supplies and assist the recovery of aching muscles.

The list below offers great food options to be snacking on in and around training for a competition. Remember to keep eating healthy foods from your regular diet though, such as fresh vegetables, nuts and fruits.

Here are some more you can try

- Water, diluted fruit juice with a pinch of salt or a sports drink
- Pasta salad
- Plain sandwiches e.g. chicken, tuna, cheese with salad, banana, peanut butter

- Bananas, grapes, apples, plums, pears
- Dried fruit e.g. raisins, apricots, mango
- Smoothies
- Crackers and rice cakes with bananas and/or honey
- Mini-pancakes, fruit buns
- Cereal bars, fruit bars, sesame snaps
- Yoghurt and yoghurt drinks
- Small bags of unsalted nuts e.g. peanuts, cashews, almonds
- Prepared vegetable crudités e.g. carrots, peppers, cucumber and celery

Oat Apple Muffins

175g self raising flour, white or half wholemeal and white

125g oats

125g brown sugar

2 tsp baking powder

¼ tsp salt

4 tbsp oil

1 large egg

250ml milk or buttermilk

125g grated apple

- Mix together the flour, oats, sugar, baking powder and salt in a large bowl
- Combine the oil, egg and milk in a separate bowl then stir into the flour mixture
- Fold in the fruit
- Spoon the mixture into lightly oiled muffin tins, filling them 2/3 full
- Bake at 190 degrees/gas mark 5 for 20 minutes until firm to touch and light brown