



Ironman Triathlon

December 2010

About Ironman Triathlon

Ironman triathlon is a gruelling event consisting of a 3.8km swim, followed by a 180km ride, topped off with a 42.2km run. Elite male athletes typically complete races in 8-8.5 hours, with elite females finishing in around 9-9.5 hours. The average completion time is around 11-12hrs and cut off times range from 15.5hrs – 17hrs. The events usually start early (e.g. 6-6.30am) and competitors will finish from anytime after 3pm that same day. **TIP: Pre-race check in can take up to 1hr ∴ be prepared to be there early.**

In general, experienced triathletes with a long training history compete, as many years of training are required to undertake an event of this duration. The biggest age group is 30-40years, but don't be surprised to see athletes in their 50's and 60's. Ironman competitors often need to complete specified half ironman races and place high enough in their age group to earn a coveted ironman spot.

Training Diet & Fluid Needs

The purpose of this fact sheet is to address competition issues rather than training dietary issues. For training diet information including discussion on fluid requirements, refer to the [SDA triathlon fact sheet](#).

What should I eat & drink in the days before competition?

- Take familiar foods when competing in different or unfamiliar locations e.g. pasta, pasta sauce, bread, cereal/muesli bars, spreads e.g. jam, peanut butter, vegemite, cordial, meal replacers
- Find accommodation with cooking facilities to maintain some familiarity with foods, particularly in the pre-race period

- Most athletes will benefit from undertaking a carbohydrate loading diet in the 36-48 hours prior to race (see fact sheet on [Eating and Drinking before Sport](#)). A qualified Sports Dietitian can help design loading regime tailored to your special requirements.
- Many ironman races have a pre-race carbohydrate loading dinner 1-2 nights before the race, however be aware of the fat content of some of the meals offered. Remember it is carbohydrate loading not fat loading! It's important that you have a clear plan of the type and amount of foods and fluids you plan to have during this period. This will help ensure that you don't over or under do it in the lead up to the race
- There are specialised Carbohydrate loader drinks (e.g. PB Carbo loader) and meal substitutes (e.g. Sustagen® Sport) that can help to achieve the **10-12g of carbohydrate per kg body weight required to maximise muscle glycogen levels**. Taking advantage of more refined carbohydrate choices e.g. jelly lollies, soft drink, sports bars, is a useful way of meeting your carbohydrate targets, especially in the face of reduced appetite in the few days leading into the event. As always, all foods and fluids you have during this period should be familiar to you
- Starting the event hydrated is a priority. A drinking plan for the 24-36 hours before the race ensures a hydrated start, especially if competing in hot/humid conditions. Fluid intake pre-race should be slightly increased above that of a rest day, but drinking in excess of your sweat losses is unnecessary. Urine colour and frequency are the most practical indicators of your hydration status. Consuming low sodium fluids e.g. water, juice, soft drink with meals and sodium-containing fluids (e.g. sports drink, Gastrolyte®) in between meals ensures that the fluid you consume stays on board.

The days before (continued)...

- Prepare bidons, gels etc with your race bag as part of your race strategy.
- Pack suitable snacks into separate bike transition and run transition bags. Usually these bags are checked in the day before the race, so must not include perishable items. Perishable items can be checked into a “special needs bag” on the morning of a race and will be available only from designated aid stations. Check the race rules for more information.
- Check out what foods and fluids will be provided by race organisers in planning your race nutrition plan
- Be familiar with the race foods you intend to use. Don't try new things on race day!

The Pre-race meal

The aim of the pre-race meal is to top up muscle and liver glycogen stores and to ensure adequate hydration. You should aim to consume a combination of food and fluids that provide 1.5-2g of carbohydrate/kg in the 2-2.5 hours before the start of the race.

The foods and fluids should be **low in fat and fibre** and include only those that have been trialled previously in training. The addition of sodium rich foods e.g. toast, vegemite, and fluids e.g. Gastrolyte®, will enhance the absorption and retention of fluid in the body.

Athletes should aim to finish fluid intake approximately 1 hour before race start to allow time to go to the toilet.

A Sports Dietitian can advise you on a low residue diet if “the trots” (runners diarrhoea) are a problem during a race! [Click here to find a sports dietitian near you.](#)

What should I eat & drink during competition?

Swim

The swim leg can take up to 2 hours and there is no way of eating or drinking while swimming other than what you take in by accident! Therefore food and fluid strategies should be targeted for the bike and run legs. That said, having water or sports drink during transition after the swim will help replenish some fluid losses, as well as help get rid of the salt water taste in the mouth.

Ride

Plan to get **1 to 1.2g carbohydrate per kg body weight per hour of race**. Therefore if you weigh 70kg, try to get in 70-84g carbohydrate per hour. This can be in the form of food and fluids.

Try to stick to a race strategy with a *mix* of gels, bars, snacks and drinks to meet carbohydrate and salt needs and avoid “flavour fatigue”. Be prepared to have some back up plans, though.

Know your fluid requirements and drink to fluid plan.

Start the bike leg with a good supply of sports foods and gels to get through to the aid stations. In case you miss the aid station, some triathletes carry a “bento” box or empty bidons to store their supplies.

Be prepared for the aid stations and know where they are. Pre-race information should tell you what is available at aid stations and how far apart these are. Generally aid stations are between 10-20kms apart depending on the bike course.

There is no need to carry everything you need for the race duration as the extra weight can slow you down, but it is wise to have a back up plan in case the aid stations do not have everything you need or you miss a

station. As you approach the aid stations, know what you want and yell it out as you come through. Know the order of foods and fluids as these may be spread out over the aid station.

Consider foods that are easy to chew given that race intensity will be high. Also consider race foods and how easy they are to open while riding. For example, very liquid gels can spill easily, bars may be easier to manage if cut up into pieces pre-race. Using the timer on your watch can help you to remember to eat and drink at regular intervals along the way.

As you get towards the end of the ride leg try to get extra fluids in. Taking fluids on the bike is easier than during the run leg, so plan to start the run leg well hydrated. Be aware there are race rules about toilet stops. There should be toilet stations available.

Run

Use foods you know you can tolerate while running and take time through aid stations. Walking through can avoid drink spillage and allow extra fluid to be taken, with the advantage reaped later by being better fuelled and hydrated (however, it's important to remember that as you slow down, your fuel and fluid needs decrease. Drinking in excess of your sweat losses may put you at risk of developing a serious condition known as hyponatraemia.

Not all aid stations will be the same so know which ones have the products you'll be looking for. Check for different fruits and foods like vegemite sandwiches, soups etc to avoid flavour fatigue.

There will also be times when fuel belts that carry extra gels and bars can be helpful.

Salt tablets can be helpful to maintain salt intakes and aid fluid retention in athletes prone to heavy sweating.

Salt tablets should be taken with fluids but remember to wrap them or keep in a waterproof pouch attached to fuel belt to avoid them dissolving before you get a chance to take them.

Caffeine in various forms is a favourite of ultra endurance athletes late in events for its stimulant properties. Small doses such as those found in a can of cola soft drink can be enough to improve performance. Degassed cola drinks are available at designated aid stations in many ironman races. Another practical source of caffeine is some carbohydrate gels. Plan when you think you'll need to take it for maximum effect.

What About Recovery?

Refueling and rehydrating after an event such as ironman is important, however most competitors will take a few weeks break from training after an ironman race. Immediate recovery nutrition issues including replacement of carbohydrate, electrolytes and fluids are covered in the [Eating and Drinking After Sport fact sheet](#). Longer term recovery issues are a lower priority due to the significant reduction in training load post-race, so ironman finishers can reward themselves with a few treat foods that may have been restricted during training over the next few days and weeks. However, avoid alcohol until fully re-hydrated.

How to get involved

Contact Triathlon Australia or visit

www.triathlonaustralia.org.au; www.ironmanlive.com,
www.ironmanoz.com

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