



Road Cycling

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About Road Cycling

Road cycling is popular with children and adolescents right through to Masters level (up to 70+ years of age). It is an endurance sport where the majority of training time is spent exercising at a sub-maximal level. Long hours are spent on the bike both in training and racing. In competition, the length of races varies, between 20 to 60km for older juniors and 50 to 200+ km for seniors. Elite cyclists will often train either for three to five hours (or more) in the morning on the road and weights / track / ergo / more kilometers on the road at night. For others, it is a matter of juggling training around work/study commitments. In Australia, the main road racing season is over winter and shorter street circuits (criteriums) are raced over summer.

Training Diet

Energy needs will vary depending on life stage, training load and level of competition. Cyclists in heavy training and young growing athletes will have huge energy demands and may need to eat up to 6-8 times throughout the day to make sure these demands are met. Fuel for endurance sport depends largely on the supply of carbohydrate to the exercising muscle. It then makes sense that the training diet should consist of sufficient carbohydrate to meet the demands of training. A good quality diet with a wide range of foods from across food groups will also help to provide necessary protein, vitamins and minerals for good health and performance. Part of the training diet will be consumed on the bike so must be easy to carry and not spoil out of the refrigerator (e.g. bananas, muesli/breakfast/sports bars, gels, sports drinks).

Fluid Needs

The fluid needs of cyclists are high as training sessions last a long time and requirements increase even further during the warmer months. Cyclists are often limited to the amount of fluid they consume by what they can carry and don't drink enough. Therefore it is very important to keep well hydrated by drinking water throughout the day and extra fluid after training. During training, aim to drink at least 1 bidon of fluid every hour. If training on the road, plan to refill the bidon regularly (e.g. at service stations), and use these stops as markers of fluid intake. Sports drinks are a good way of supplying carbohydrate and fluid at the same time. For more information see [Fluids in Sport](#).

What should I eat pre-event?

Fueling strategy on the day will depend on the timing of the event. If time allows, consume a carbohydrate rich meal ~ 2 to 4 hours prior to the start or for early starts a lighter snack 1 to 2 hours prior with a larger high-carbohydrate meal the previous night may be preferred. Top up glycogen levels an hour or so before the race with foods like bananas or muesli bars. If nerves are a problem a liquid meal replacement drink such as Sustagen Sport® may be useful. Begin the race well hydrated by drinking the equivalent of ½ to 1 bidon of fluid with the pre-event meal and ½ bidon immediately prior. For events longer than 90 minutes, a carbohydrate loading strategy may be beneficial - consult a sports dietitian for further advice. For more information see [Eating and Drinking Before Sport](#).

See over for examples of pre-event foods...

Examples of pre event meals:

- Breakfast cereal with low fat milk
- Canned spaghetti on toast
- Pasta with tomato-based sauce
- Toasted ham and tomato sandwich
- Liquid nutrition supplement, such as Sustagen® Sport

What should I eat/drink during competition?

Cyclists are fortunate in that they can carry food and drink on the bike during a race. In longer races, easily digested carbohydrate-rich foods should be consumed to prevent fatigue secondary to glycogen depletion. Examples are jam sandwiches, commercial sports bars or gels and sugar-type lollies. Cyclists do not like to carry any extra weight than they have to, so sports drinks can be an efficient way to carry fluid and carbohydrate together. For longer races, the opportunity to leave additional bottles of sports drink or water at feeding stations may be available - check if this option exists well in advance of race day. Aim to drink 1 to 1½ bidons per hour. For more information see [Eating and Drinking During and After Sport](#).

What about Recovery?

Good recovery is crucial especially on cycling tours where the cyclists race once or twice a day over consecutive days. Immediately after the race, continue fluid intake and get some carbohydrate in, and again sports drinks or cordials can be an easy way to do this. Yoghurt and milk-based drinks at this time provide additional protein and other nutrients.

Soon after, follow up with a substantial meal based on carbohydrate-rich foods such as rice, pasta or bread combined with lean protein sources such as meat, poultry and fish to replenish fuel stores and help repair muscle damage. Maintain high a fluid intake. For more information see [Eating and Drinking During and After Sport](#).

Other Nutrition Tips

- Don't try anything new on race day. Always experiment with types and timing of food and fluid intake during training.
- Often races are held in rural or bush areas with minimal or no facilities, where even the water may not be suitable for drinking. Be prepared with your own supply of water and carbohydrate-rich foods for before, during and after racing.
- Remember to stay in the shade, particularly during the summer months. This will help to minimise fluid losses whilst waiting for races. Take a large beach umbrella or cabana if no shade is available for long race days.
- Road cycling has a reputation for the widespread use of all kinds of supplements. Often there is no scientific justification and the supplements are usually not necessary. If you want more advice about supplements consult a sports dietitian. Click on the highlighted link to find a sports dietitian near you: [Find a Sports Dietitian](#).
- Road cycling is an example of a sport where high energy food and fluid supplements can be a convenient way to meet energy requirements.

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