

FACT SHEET

DISTANCE RUNNING

ABOUT DISTANCE RUNNING

Distance running covers events including the 10km, 15km, half-marathon (21.1km) and full marathon (42.2km) distances. These can be track races, road races, or cross-country runs, and are conducted all year round, regardless of weather conditions. These events attract recreational and elite-level competitors running side-by-side, making it an extremely inclusive activity.

While it is not yet possible to pick and choose our genes, those better-suited to distance running tend to be of light build, with low body fat and a high maximal aerobic capacity (which means they can run stronger for longer).

TRAINING DIET

Distance runners need plenty of energy to give them stamina for heavy training and competition workloads. Training diets should be based on quality carbohydrate (from breads, cereals and pasta), moderate amounts of protein, small amounts of fats (such as those found in oily fish, poly and monounsaturated fats and oils), and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables to ensure sufficient energy, body function, muscle repair, and an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals.

FLUID NEEDS

Dehydration can impair exercise performance so it particularly important for distance runners to consider their fluid needs when competing in warm conditions and extended training sessions. To ensure good day-to-day hydration level, athletes should aim for pale yellow urine. Fluid needs vary for different athletes based on their individual sweat rates. Athletes can easily estimate their sweat rates in various conditions and training sessions by weighing themselves before and after exercise. For more detail see the Fluid in Sport fact sheet. Drinks containing carbohydrates, such as sports drinks (which usually contain 4 to 8% carbohydrate) can be a good option during and after training, to help maintain fluid, carbohydrate and sodium consumption.

EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

The timing of an event will dictate how much you eat and at what time. Given that most races are conducted in the morning, it doesn't make sense to sacrifice sleep in order to eat and digest a full meal (which would mean you'd have to start eating 2 to 4 hours before the event). However, you should aim to eat a light carbohydrate-based snack 1 to 2 hours before competing to top up the body's energy stores. Low fibre options are good to help prevent stomach upset. Easy to digest options include toast or crumpets with jam or honey, small bowl of cereal or yoghurt and fruit. For runners that suffer from nerves may find a liquid meal supplement, a home-made smoothie, or sports drinks and bars be a better option.

It is important to practice how it feels to run long distances after eating various pre-race meals, and choose the one that works best for you.

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

There is generally no need to consume carbohydrate during runs lasting less than around 60 minutes. For longer distance running events or training sessions, performance has been shown to improve if carbohydrates are ingested during an event, but unlike cyclists, who are in a better position (literally!) to eat solid foods, runners are limited in what they are able to consume while competing. This means that the easiest and most convenient options for runners are foods like sports drinks or sports gels to get the extra carbohydrate, energy and fluid in along the way. But remember: don't try anything new for the first time on race day. Make sure you're comfortable with using your preferred choice of food and drink during training and before the big event.

On a fluid note, it is important to start well hydrated and replace fluid losses after competing. Some runners tend to over-drink before a race which can lead to unwanted toilet stops. Make sure you are well hydrated in the days leading up to an event and slowly sip small amounts of fluid about 15 minutes before the start gun, which will help your body absorb the water. Make sure you practice drinking during your long training runs and mimic your drink stops that will occur during your race. Don't forget to rehydrate after the event.

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RECOVERY

A carbohydrate-rich snack with some protein is ideal within half an hour of finishing. Easy to digest items, such as smoothies, muesli bars, yogurt will help the body to rebuild its energy reserves quickly, and including some protein will help to repair and rebuild muscles. A follow-up meal, containing protein and carbohydrate should be eaten with 2 to 4 hours of finishing the event.

Sports drinks will help to replace fluid, and they contain carbohydrate and salt to help replace your losses and make you thirstier! Be careful of using sports drinks too often if running shorter distances and trying to lose weight; these drinks do contain quite a lot of calories and need to be included in your total daily energy budget.

OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- Be prepared with good food choices when competing – don't rely on the venue canteen or tuck shop as most of them will not have ideal snacks for recovery.
- Freeze your recovery drink overnight and take with to training in the morning. By the time you finish your long run, it will have melted and provide a refreshing cool drink for hydration.
- The volume of food and the practical aspects of meeting energy and carbohydrate requirements will vary with the level of training and from athlete to athlete. A Sports Dietitian can help you assess your individual needs to meet your performance goals.
- While you may be keen to celebrate achieving your personal best, or finishing the race, with a 'refreshing' ale or two, try to fulfil your body's immediate re-fuelling needs first, before indulging your "thirst", and do so only in moderation. Alcohol can prevent you from achieving full recovery.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Buy a decent pair of runners, some active wear, and get going. It takes dedication and commitment to become a good runner so keep at it.

A good way to maintain motivation and enjoyment in running is to join a club, or even gather together some like-minded friends, and make running a social, as well as a fitness activity.

While fun run organisers vary, websites such as <http://www.starttofinish.com.au> list upcoming events, along with plenty of interesting information and tips for improving running performance.

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