



Fuelling Fitness for Your Sport – Distance Running

About Distance Running

The umbrella title of distance running covers events including the 10km, 15km, half-marathon (21.1km) and full marathon (42.2km) distances. They are generally road races, or cross-country runs, and are most often conducted in the warmer months. Frequently conducted as 'fun runs', these events attract recreational and elite-level competitors running side-by-side, making it an extremely inclusive activity.

Physical characteristics

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, so the main aim should be for a diet high in carbohydrate (from breads, cereals and pasta) moderate amounts of protein, some fats (such as those found in oily fish, walnuts and canola oil), and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables to ensure sufficient energy, body function, muscle repair, and an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals.

It is a good idea to seek advice from a sports dietitian for a tailored plan for your protein and carbohydrate requirements.

Fluid Needs

Dehydration increases strain on the body so much that it only takes a loss of more than 2% of body weight to impair exercise performance. This is especially important to consider when competing in warm conditions and extended training sessions. But adequate hydration should be maintained on a daily basis, with water the fluid of choice. Drinks containing carbohydrates, such as sports drinks (which usually contain 4 to 8% carbohydrate) are a good option during and after training, to help maintain fluid, carbohydrate and sodium consumption. Flavoured milk and juice are also suitable for the athlete with high carbohydrate and energy demands.



What Should I Eat Pre-Event?

Pre-event eating is a little bit like filling your car with petrol before setting off on a long journey.

The timing of an event will dictate how much you eat and at what time. Given that most 'fun-runs' 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). But even a light carbohydrate-based snack should be eaten 1 to 2 hours before competing is good and tops up the body's energy stores.

Before an event, a light meal containing low-fibre carbohydrates is most suitable, e.g. a couple of pieces of toast with jam or honey, and a glass of water. Some runners suffer from nerves, and in these instances, a liquid meal supplement, a home-made smoothie, or sports drinks and bars may 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.

What Should I Eat/Drink During Competition?

Distance running 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 things like sports drinks or sports gels to get the extra carbohydrate energy and fluid in along the way. But remember: don't try them for the first time on race day. Make sure you're comfortable with using them during training before the big event.

On a fluid note, it is important to start well hydrated and replace fluid losses after competing. But take care not to *over*drink, as this can lead to a condition called 'hyponatraemia' where the body's salts are diluted, the effects of which can be fatal. Starting the race with 300 to 400ml immediately before, and drinking small amounts early in the race, can help to avoid over-drinking and pace fluid intake to avoid extreme thirst.

What About Recovery?

A carbohydrate-rich snack with some protein is ideal within half an hour of finishing. Easy to digest items, such as white bread, banana and honey, 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, as well as some carbohydrate and salt to help replace your losses and make you thirstier! But even a sports drink won't provide enough salt most of the time, so it is a good idea to eat some salty snacks, or add salt to your meals in the 24 hours after the event. Consider using an oral rehydration

For more great sports nutrition information visit www.sportsdietitians.com

© Sports Dietitians Australia, 2004



product such as Gastrolyte, which contain much more sodium than sports drinks, and are also quite palatable.

Finally, 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 and can impair rehydration. It can also make getting up for training the morning after very difficult!

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.
- 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.

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

Author: Celia Hirsh 2008