

FACT SHEET

FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT – TRIATHLON: SPRINT & OLYMPIC DISTANCE

ABOUT TRIATHLON: SPRINT & OLYMPIC DISTANCE

Triathlon combines three disciplines of swimming, cycling and running into one event. In Australia, the competition season generally starts in late October and continues through until April.

This factsheet will focus on the shorter distance triathlons of Sprint (750m swim, 20km bike and 5km run) and Olympic Distance (1.5km swim, 40km bike and 10km run). Shorter races are also commonly hosted as enticer or introductory events or to involve children.

Triathlon is a unique sport which sees professional and elite athletes racing alongside age-group competitors of all fitness levels. With this, the type of training undertaken by the athlete for a race is heavily dependent on the level of experience of the athlete, their training phase and the length of the event. Training per week can range from 5hrs for some age-group athletes, up to 25hrs for the elite competitors.

Unlike single modality sports, triathletes need to balance training for three sports into their weekly schedule. This often involves some days with 2-3 sessions to fit it all in. You will typically find speed/interval and threshold sessions on weekdays, with longer aerobic and 'brick' sessions completed over the weekend when there is generally more time available. Brick sessions refer to sessions that include two or more of the legs of triathlon – e.g. a cycle session followed by a run.

A triathlete's off-season is generally over the winter months. An individual athlete may choose to have a longer rest during this phase, or may use this time to build a training base to assist them with aerobic capacity as the racing season approaches. Some triathletes also compete in Duathlons (run-ride-run) over the winter months as an alternative competitive sport.

TRAINING DIET

The training diet for a triathlete needs to be varied and periodised to the training needs for that day, week and program phase. As many triathletes train most days, often multiple times per day, good nutrition is needed to promote recovery and adaptation and, to maximise energy levels.

Carbohydrate intake should be matched to training load. During the competition season, the training diet should be adapted to reflect the higher training load and need for high quality training with increased speed and power. Protein rich foods should be eaten regularly to meet daily requirements, maintain lean mass and optimising muscle repair following training should be included. A consistent intake of healthy fats and a variety of fruits and vegetables will promote a healthy immune system, while also assisting with training adaptations.

With less than 24-hrs between each training session being common, recovery nutrition should be a priority. Pre-season and competition season is the time to start to incorporate more sports foods and trial competition nutrition in training.

The off-season is the ideal time to achieve your optimal body composition for the upcoming race-season – an Accredited Sports Dietitian can help you determine an individual plan to match your goals.

FLUID NEEDS

Fluid requirements vary considerably between each individual athlete and will depend on factors such as their individual sweat rate and sweat composition, environmental conditions and their ability to tolerate fluid intake while training and competing.

Dehydration, both in daily training and racing, can lead to fatigue, loss of concentration and overall reduced performance. Adequate fluid should be prioritised as a vital component to an athlete's nutrition.

Choosing sports drink during short events can not only contribute to hydration, but also performance enhancement via carbohydrate for fuel.

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EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

Most triathlons start early morning, however there are many shorter races now starting in the late morning or afternoon. The time of race start will impact the ideal pre-race nutrition.

For early morning events, the pre-event meal should ideally be consumed 1½ - 2 hours before the start of the race. For shorter races, it isn't essential to have large amounts of food, but it is important to eat enough to top up liver glycogen stores and prevent hunger. This can be achieved through a small breakfast such as toast, porridge or a fruit based smoothie option. A small snack such as a banana can then be consumed in the 30mins before the race if needed.

For later races, triathletes will generally aim for a meal 3-4 hours before the race and then a smaller 'top-up' snack 1-2 hours before race start. Meal choices may include breakfast cereals, porridge, toast or pancakes if breakfast, or wraps, sandwiches, pasta or bread rolls if a late evening race. The 'top-up' snack may then be a smaller serve of the above or options such as fruit and yoghurt, smoothies or liquid meal replacements.

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

The time taken to complete a triathlon will impact the ideal intake of both nutrition and hydration.

- For events lasting 40-75mins, only small amounts of carbohydrate are needed. This can be achieved with an intake of 20-30g of carbohydrate per the hour or via carbohydrate mouth rinse (see below);
- For events from 75-180mins in duration, intake of 30-60g of carbohydrate per hour is recommended.

The carbohydrate mouth-rinse is a strategy that has been shown to enhance performance without the need to ingest any carbohydrate. This can be extremely useful in high intensity, short-distance events where intake is not always practical or well tolerated. To effectively do this, a carbohydrate containing solution or gel lolly should be held in the mouth for at least 7-10secs.

For events lasting longer than an hour intake of carbohydrate is recommended. This can be achieved through sports foods such as gels or bars, carbohydrate containing sports drink, or whole foods such as bananas. For these distances and intensities, fluids and gels tend to be the more practical and well tolerated option – particularly those racing at the elite or competitive age-group level where intensities are high.

The most important focus of hydration should be to start the race well hydrated. Due to the speed and intensity of these events, the ability to drink fluids during the race is limited so should be optimised on the bike and maintained as best as possible on the run. Amounts will be dependent on the time of race start and the weather conditions.

RECOVERY

Due to the intensity of effort involved in completing shorter distance triathlons, athletes often do not feel like eating as after they finish. However, as there is often a small turnaround to the next training session or race, eating a protein and carbohydrate-containing snack soon after finishing is important for promoting recovery. Fluids may be the most practical and well-tolerated option initially.

Most triathlons include a recovery station at the finish that has water, sports drink and seasonal fruit available. This is a good place to start for recovery, but is often low in protein. As such, it is ideal to plan ahead rather than rely on what is provided. Suitable options include:

- Fruit Smoothies or Milkshakes
- Long-Life Liquid Meal Replacement Tetras
- Eggs or beans on Toast
- Sandwich/wrap/roll filled with meat & salad
- Cereal or porridge with nuts and yoghurt

OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- **Race nutrition** is very individual and will vary considerably depending personal preference and tolerance. Practice your race nutrition in training.
- **Sports foods** An Accredited Sports Dietitian can assist in finding the most appropriate supplement/s that is best suited to each individual