

## FACT SHEET

# FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT – TRAIL RUNNING

## ABOUT TRAIL RUNNING

Trail running is becoming increasingly popular, as runners leave the pavements behind for wide-open spaces in the great outdoors. While there are trails of wild terrain in the middle of nowhere, trails don't have to be rough and rugged and require an overnight stay to reach. In fact, there is no strict definition for what constitutes a "trail run" – it could be just taking your run from the concrete and onto an uneven surface, such as gravel, grass or sand (e.g. local park, bike tracks, beach tracks or local bushland). For competitive racing however there are more specific guidelines about what is recognized as a trail running course.

Local trail groups provide a thriving community of like-minded runners, who can offer suggestions for nearby trails. Trail running can be an enjoyable and social pursuit for recreational runners, but it can also be competitive. Trail racing can range from 1km to over 160km, covering a range of styles of events, including kids races, ascents (where you are running straight up-hill), multi-day stage races and part of adventure races.

There are a number of benefits to heading for the trails rather than road running including, balance (different muscles), reduced impact on joints, interesting scenery, psychological benefits, social element, adventure, challenge, being in touch with natural environment

The nutrition requirements for trail running vary greatly according to the type of training and racing. For longer races, nutrition support in the form of frequent checkpoints/aid stations are provided, however some races may require runners to be self-sufficient. Trail running nutrition needs vary significantly due to the nature of the events.

A wide range of temperature and humidity and daylight if you are starting early and finishing late are common. The terrain can be diverse, from flat trails to hills and technical sections all requiring variations in pace and skill. It is important to consider the specific trail event to determine specific nutrition needs. Nutrition planning can be a challenge, requiring flexibility and back up plans as races can change quickly.

## TRAINING DIET

Individual requirements will be determined by training load, type of sessions and training goals, specific individual needs, environment, body composition goals, health and adjustment for growth in younger runners.

The best training diet will depend on the type of trail runner and target events. Some people might throw in a trail run as part of an overall mixed week of exercise, while others may be more serious competitors working towards specific races. Either way, there are some common principles when it comes to nutrition for training:

- **Fuel** – appropriate type, amount and timing of muscle fuel (predominantly carbohydrate but also fat at lower intensities) important for training.
- **Repair** – protein is important to repair muscles between runs and for healthy mitochondria (the powerhouse of exercising muscle cells).
- **Energy and health** – a range of nutrients including vitamins and minerals, antioxidants, fats and fibre help our bodies to work at their best. A range of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and healthy fats are an important part of a great base diet.

## FLUID NEEDS

It is important to start your run hydrated. This requires regular fluid intake throughout the day leading up to training or competition. Having a drink with all meals and snacks is a good start.

It's also important to replace fluid losses during and after training. Individual fluid losses will vary depending on individual sweat rate, which is partly genetic but also determined by environmental factors. Hot or humid weather lead to high body fluid losses. Hydration needs depend on the event, environment and practicality.

Rather than relying on perceived sweat rate or thirst to determine fluid needs, a useful way to estimate fluid losses is to measure weight before and after a run. It is a good idea to do this in different training environments over time. This allows a better understanding of individual sweat losses and helps to plan fluids for training or races.

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### EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

Each runner will differ in their preferred food and fluids in the lead up to a race. For some events, carbohydrate loading may be relevant. There are a number of ways that this can be achieved, and it is important discussing this needs with an Accredited Sports Dietitian for best results.

On race day, many trail runners prefer to keep their breakfast light and quickly digested. If running pace is likely to be lower for longer distances, a bigger breakfast may be tolerated. The pre-race/event meal should focus on carbohydrate. Small amounts of protein can help to prevent hunger. Avoidance excess fat and fibre can help with gut comfort. Individual preference and tolerance will influence pre-race food and fluid intake, however, some ideas for suitable pre-run breakfasts include:

- Light style cereal or oats/porridge with fruit
- Toast with vegemite + piece of fruit
- Toasted sandwich
- Pasta or rice dish
- Rice cakes with peanut butter + banana

If solids don't sit well before a race, or runners are very nervous, a liquid source of protein and carbohydrate such as a fruit smoothie can be a good option.

### EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

Fuel requirements and preferences will differ between individuals and events. For short or low intensity runs under 90 minutes, there is no need to consume carbohydrate while you are running if you have fuelled appropriately beforehand, although small amounts can still be beneficial for preventing fatigue. For runs longer than 2 hours it is important to consider your fuelling strategies before and during the run. The faster the running pace, the more important it is to eat and drink quick and easy carbohydrate options to fuel your muscles. For slower paces and during longer events there is more opportunity to eat solid foods – especially at checkpoints/aid stations.

Flavour fatigue is really common in trail running events particularly those that are over long distances so it is important to consider having a range of food options and assortment of different flavours/textures for variety.

Hydration is important. Electrolyte replacement should be considered when running in hot and humid conditions or over a prolonged period of time.

It's relatively common for distance runners to experience some gut issues, often to the extent where performance is affected. The key is to work out what works best for each individual. Although it is challenging to replicate race-day circumstances (as they change from race-to-race), using training runs is a good time to practise event day nutrition to determine what sits well and fuels the body well.

### RECOVERY

There are three golden rules in recovery nutrition:

- Refuel muscle glycogen (carbohydrate stores)
- Repair muscle (for function & development)
- Rehydrate (replace fluids lost through sweat)

Recovery meals and snacks should contain carbohydrate (fuel), some protein (for muscle repair and development) and plenty of fluids and electrolytes to replace sweat losses. A recovery meal or snack should be consumed soon after exercise, remembering that recovery nutrition extends well beyond the initial hours after the run. Fluids (mainly water) should also be consumed, based on estimated losses.

Some recovery food suggestions include:

- Cheese, ham, avocado and salad sandwich
- Dairy-based fruit smoothie
- Yoghurt + muesli with nuts and seeds
- Tuna and quinoa salad
- Burritos with chicken, cheese, avocado and salad

It can be hard to eat straight after a run. In these situations, it is fine to hold off on a bigger meal until a little later, but important to eat small snacks after the event to kickstart the recovery processes.

### OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- **Plan ahead** Develop a schedule for food and fluid intake during racing. This schedule also needs to be flexible as your race strategy may change and each race is different. An Accredited Sports Dietitian can help you reach optimal performance.