

FACT SHEET

FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT AFLW



ABOUT AFLW

The Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) inaugural competition season commenced in 2017 with eight professional teams from across Australia. The league now comprises of 14 professional teams and numerous sub-elite teams with participation in the local leagues significantly increasing since the introduction of the professional competition. The league completes an eight-week pre-season where they focus on match play, fitness, and strength. The AFLW season typically begins at the start of February for eight rounds and two weeks of finals. Most players will then have a small amount of time off before they begin their state-league competition from May to September.

There are four 15-minute quarters plus time on with 16 players on the field and five on the interchange bench. A player can cover 5.5-7.5 km a game with approximately 20% of this being high intensity running. At the professional level, body composition of the AFLW athlete will vary between individuals, position on the field and the time of season. There is no such thing as an 'ideal' body composition for a female athlete. Rather one that promotes good health, reduces injury risk and maximises performance for the individual athlete is recommended. The measurement of body composition should only be completed by a qualified professional such as an Accredited Sports Dietitian.

TRAINING FOODS

The training diet for an AFLW player is not dissimilar to any other athlete and needs to contain a variety of foods to optimise health and performance. Carbohydrate foods provide the energy required for training while protein foods are required for the repair and recovery of muscle. Unrefined grain foods, fruit, vegetables, lean proteins, legumes, nut, seeds, and dairy should make up the majority of dietary intake providing essential micronutrients and macronutrients. The amount and timing of foods need to be considered in and around training sessions, schedules outside of training and requirements for the goals of the individual. Good planning and realistic practical food strategies are required to meet nutritional needs.

HYDRATION NEEDS

The AFLW pre-season and games are predominantly played in summer and the warmer months making good hydration a priority. Dehydration can result in increased perception of effort, early fatigue, poor concentration and ultimately decision making. Beginning training sessions and games properly hydrated and taking every opportunity to drink is important.

Fluid requirements will vary depending on the individual's fluid losses and this will depend on their sweat rate, body size, distance covered in the game and how well they can tolerate fluid intake, during performance. Athletes can measure fluid losses by weighing before and after training. Any weight loss over this time will be fluid. A 1 kg loss in weight equates to a 1 litre loss of fluid. This loss plus an extra 50% needs to be consumed (i.e. 1.5 litres). It is also possible to overhydrate, which if playing a night game can lead to increased waking or in more severe cases, hyponatremia.

Water is an ideal source of fluid however a sports drink can also be used if the player requires carbohydrate. If sweat losses are high, an electrolyte replacement can be used if necessary but is not required by everyone.

EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

It is important to start a game well fueled. A small increase in carbohydrate at each meal in the 24 hours prior to the game will help to top up stores. For example, at breakfast an addition of a banana to muesli would be suitable. The last main meal should take place 3-4 hours prior to the game to allow time for digestion with a focus on carbohydrate and including a moderate amount of protein and fat. The size of the meal will depend on the individual.

Pre-game meal ideas:

- Muesli with banana and yoghurt
- Sandwich/roll with ham/chicken and salad
- Sushi rolls
- Chicken and vegetable stir-fry with rice

A light snack can be consumed 1-2 hours prior to the game and should contain easy to digest carbohydrates (e.g. white bread, white rice etc) to provide energy while not sitting in the stomach. A small amount of protein in the snack can help to prevent hunger.

Pre-game snack ideas:

- Jam sandwich on white bread
- Banana and honey smoothie made with low fat milk
- Muesli bar and piece of fruit
- Low fat fruit muffin

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

Players should top up their energy levels throughout the game with small amounts of carbohydrate. This can be in the form of a sports drink or gels and in the longer breaks fruit, and high carbohydrate snacks such as pretzels or rice crackers. What is consumed will

depend on the individual and how they are feeling, and anything used during a game should be trialed in training to avoid potential adverse effects of intake such as an upset stomach.

Fluid intake is also important. Players can access fluid while on the bench, during quarter time breaks and when approached by a trainer on the field. Making the most of these opportunities is important.

RECOVERY

The aim of a recovery meal or snack is to replenish energy stores with carbohydrate, repair muscle with protein and rehydrate with water. Consuming the meal or snack as soon as possible is recommended to optimise recovery. After a game, some athletes do not feel like eating straight away. In this case, finding something that contains carbohydrate and protein while also being palatable and attractive is important. Some good options include:

- Flavoured milk
- Protein shake and banana
- Burritos with meat, salad and rice filling
- Healthy burgers or pizza with meat, salads/vegetables

ENERGY AVAILABILITY

Female (and male) athletes are at risk of low energy availability (LEA). LEA is when the amount of energy available for basic physiological functions is insufficient which if continued for too long, can result in significant health and performance risks to the athlete such as Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S). This can occur when the athlete does not consume enough energy from food to meet their personal health and training/performance requirements. A mismatch of energy can be intentional (i.e. athletes experiencing disordered eating or eating disorders) or inadvertent and it therefore important to work closely with each individual athlete to achieve their energy requirements.

Professional female athletes often have a lot going on outside of their sport with work, university or family etc. Personal expectations around body composition or image related to media coverage/appearances or the perception of an 'ideal body' for performance can lead to compromised nutritional intake and subsequent LEA. Working with an Accredited Sports Dietitian to appropriately plan dietary intake to meet health and performance requirements or address body image concerns is recommended.

Supplements including sports foods (protein powders, sports drinks etc.), ergogenic aids (caffeine, creatine, beta-alanine etc.) and nutritional supplements (multi-vitamins, Vitamin C etc.) should only be considered once a nutritional assessment has been completed. An Accredited Sports Dietitian can safely advise on supplement use if and as indicated, in the context of a well – balanced diet. Supplements can pose a risk to athletes as they can contain ingredients that are banned by the World Anti-doping Agency. If an athlete chooses to take a supplement, it is their responsibility to ensure it is:

1. Safe
2. Legal
3. Contains evidence for suggested benefits and
4. Third party batch tested from banned substances by Informed Sport or HASTA.

TIPS/CONSIDERATIONS

Not everyone has time to prepare meals from scratch and that is ok. There are plenty of good pre-prepared meals available online and in some supermarkets. Having these in your freezer can be a big help when you don't have time or energy to cook.

Iron requirements are also very important for female footballers – fatigue, dizziness, poor high intensity performance or loss of appetite may all be indicators of low iron – speak to your GP, team Sports Doctor or Accredited Sports Dietitian for medical advice.