

FACT SHEET

FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT – LONG COURSE TRIATHLON (HALF & FULL IRONMAN)

ABOUT LONG COURSE TRIATHLON

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 longer distance triathlons of Half-Ironman distance (1.9km swim, 90km bike and 21.1km run) and Ironman distance (3.8km swim, 180km bike and 42.2km run).

Triathlon is a sport that sees professional athletes racing alongside age-group competitors of all fitness levels. The type of training undertaken by the triathlete for a race is heavily dependent on the level of experience of the athlete, their training phase and the length of the event.

Due to being a multi modality sport, training load is often high due to needing to balance training for three sports into the weekly schedule – with many days comprising of 2-3 sessions. With this, training per week for long-course athletes can range from 10hrs for some age-group athletes up to 30+hrs for the elite competitors.

Training sessions will typically include speed/interval and threshold sessions throughout the working week, with then longer aerobic and 'brick' sessions fitted in over the weekend. Brick sessions refer to sessions that include two or more 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 here, or use this time to build a training base to assist them with aerobic capacity as the racing season approaches. There will often be a longer active recovery phase following a race in long-course triathlon.

TRAINING DIET

The training diet for a long course triathlete needs to be varied and periodised to the training needs for that day, week or phase in their program. As many triathletes train more than five days per week; often multiple times per day, food should be prioritised to promote recovery, daily energy levels and optimise training adaptations.

During the off-season, food can be adjusted to reduce reliance on sports foods and carbohydrate intake moderated to reflect the lower training load. Protein should continue to be prioritised to assist in meeting daily requirements, maintaining lean mass and optimising muscle repair following training. A consistent intake of healthy fats and a variety of fruits & vegetables will promote a healthy immune system over the winter months, while also assisting with training adaptations. The off-season is the ideal time to focus on optimal body composition for the upcoming race-season with the support of an Accredited Sports Dietitian for individualised advice.

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. Carbohydrate intake needs to be sufficient to balance daily fuel needs, but still periodised to match the training demands of the day. Protein should be prioritised around training sessions to assist in optimal muscle regeneration, immune function and recovery. Choosing foods with healthy fats will also help boost recovery and help meet energy requirements. Despite the need for a higher energy, it is important to still include a variety of fruits and vegetables to ensure adequate intakes of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals are achieved.

FLUID NEEDS

Fluid requirements vary between individuals depending on sweat rate and sweat composition, weather conditions and ability to tolerate fluid while training and competing.

Athletes should start races well hydrated and continue to optimise hydration throughout the race. Obviously this presents a challenge in the swim leg, but can to be maximised on the bike leg. As the intensity of racing is lower compared to shorter distance races, more fluid can usually be consumed and tolerated.

Dehydration, both in daily training and racing, can lead to fatigue, loss of concentration and impaired performance due to loss of power and intensity. Subsequently fluid should be prioritised as a component to an athlete's nutrition. Due to the length of training sessions and races, a combination of water and sports drinks is common.

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EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

Effective carbohydrate loading can be achieved within 2-3 days prior combined with reduced training load. This loading should not be achieved through simply eating more food, but rather targeted intake of more carbohydrate rich foods or fluids. Consulting with an Accredited Sports Dietitian to assist with this will reduce risk of gut upset and optimise muscle glycogen stores.

Long distance triathlons most frequently start in the early morning anywhere between 6-8am. Eating any more than 2 hours before the race can be a challenge and pre-race nutrition needs to be modified to suit this. Ideally a pre-race easy to digest, carbohydrate-rich meal should be eaten 90-120 mins before the start. Suitable options include cereal, porridge, bircher muesli, crumpets, English muffins or toast. For athletes struggling with poor appetite and nerves, liquid meal options may be better tolerated – for example fruit smoothies or liquid meal replacements.

Top up snack/s such as banana or sports bars can then be eaten over the 30-60mins before the race start. Small serves of sports drink or a sports gel 10-15 min prior to swim start will assist in fuelling the swim. This strategy however is highly individual and will be dependent on the athlete, their tolerance and intensity of racing.

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

For events longer than 3hrs, there is a correlation between increased carbohydrate intake and improved performance. With these findings, it is recommended that carbohydrate targets during racing should be in the range 60-90g per hour.

If the target is more than 60g per hour carbohydrate sources will need to be sourced from multiple carbohydrate types (multiple transportable carbohydrates), to ensure optimal absorption and minimal risk of gut upset. As these levels of carbohydrate intake are high, these strategies need to be practiced in training. This practice will assist in adapting the gut to absorb carbohydrate at high intensities and reduce the risk of gut upset.

To achieve optimal carbohydrate targets, it is important to

start early in the ride and continue throughout the race. Sources of carbohydrate should be varied and can include a combination of whole foods, gels, bars and drinks. Food choices should minimise high fat products so that gastric emptying isn't delayed. Adequate hydration should also be considered and a fluid plan implemented to minimise the risk of dehydration.

RECOVERY

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 racing or training. Due to the length of the race and the intensity of the effort, often athletes do not feel much like eating soon after they finish. In addition, there is often a lack of desire for sweet foods after having a lot of sweet products for multiple hours without much solid/savory food.

Half Ironman distance races typically have a recovery stall at the finish line that usually has fruit, yoghurt, ice-cream and some sports foods. Ironman distance races also have these, but usually also have some more savoury, warm options to choose from. As there is often an extended rest and recover phase following a long-course triathlon, recovery is important but does not need to be rushed.

A small snack is easier to tolerate at the finish line that should then be followed up with a more substantial option that is higher in protein. Options may include:

- Hot breakfast – eggs, beans and avo on toast
- Finger food meals that also offer fats and salts – such as good quality pizza, burritos or burgers;
- Wraps or roll filled with meat, cheese & salad
- Fruit Smoothies or Milkshakes
- Fruit topped with Yoghurt & Granola
- Liquid Meal Replacements

OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- **Sports foods** are commonly integrated into long-distance triathlon nutrition plans due to the length and nature of the event. Tolerance of sports foods is highly variable and needs to be tried in training to that the most appropriate option from a wide range of choices is selected.