

# 6 Nutrition Tips to Avoid Stomach Pain

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*"I'm afraid to eat before I exercise ... I might get a side stitch."*

*"I always carry toilet paper with me when I go on a long run."*

*"How can I change my sports diet to so I don't need pit stops..???"*

Little is more frustrating to a competitive athlete than to be well trained for an event and then get sidelined with a side stitch or diarrhea. Yes, the sports diet that's intended to enhance your performance can also bring you to a screeching halt! Sound familiar?

Transit troubles and [gastrointestinal](#) (GI) concerns are common among athletes, particularly those who run and jostle their intestines. An estimated 30 to 50 percent of distance runners experience exercise-related intestinal problems, with women experiencing more problems than do men.

If you are among the many active people who fear side stitches, loose stools, and GI distress, keep reading. The goal of this article is to offer some information and advice that can help you manage, if not reduce, your transit troubles.

## Side Stitches

A side stitch--that stabbing pain in your gut that can bring you to a stand-still--is familiar to about 60 percent of athletes. Because getting attacked by a side stitch is unpredictable (that is, one day you might get one but the next day you don't), they are hard to research. The available data suggests they commonly occur in the same spot: on the upper right side of the abdomen where the liver is attached to the diaphragm by two ligaments.

While we aren't 100 percent certain what causes a side stitch, the prevailing theory is exercise creates stress on the ligaments that connect the liver to the diaphragm. Stitches can be provoked by a heavy dose of pre-exercise food/fluids, minimal training and inadequate pre-exercise [warm-up](#).

Wearing a tight belt can help reduce organ jostling and reduce the symptoms. You could also record your food and fluid intake to try to detect triggers (too much pre-exercise water? too large a meal?). With repeated dietary tweaks, you can hopefully discover a tolerable portion of pre-exercise fuel.

To treat a side stitch, many athletes bend forward, stretch the affected side, breathe deeply from the belly, push up on the affected area, tighten the abdominal muscles, and/or change from "shallow" to "deep" breathing. (Pretend you are blowing out candles while exhaling with pursed lips.)

## Dreaded Diarrhea

Marathoner Bill Rodgers may have been right when he commented more marathons are won or lost at the porta-toilets than they are at the dinner table. Diarrhea is a major concern for many athletes, particularly those who run--and understandably so. Running jostles the intestines,

reduces blood flow to the intestines as the body sends more blood to the exercising muscles, stimulates changes in intestinal hormones that hasten transit time, alters absorption rate, and contributes to dehydration-based diarrhea.

Add some stress, pre-event jitters, high intensity effort--and it's no wonder athletes (particularly novices whose bodies are yet unaccustomed to the [stress](#) of hard exercise) fret about "runners' trots."

Exercise--specifically more exercise than your body is accustomed to doing--speeds up GI transit time. (Strength- training also accelerated transit time from an average of 44 hours to 20 hours in healthy, untrained 60-year old men.)

As your body adjusts to the exercise, your intestines may resume standard bowel patterns. But not always, as witnessed by the number of experienced runners who carry toilet paper with them while running. (They also know the whereabouts of every public toilet on the route.) Athletes with pre-existing GI conditions, such as irritable bowel or lactose intolerance, commonly deal with runners' trots.

### **Solutions for Intestinal Rebellion**

To help alleviate undesired pit stops, try exercising lightly before a harder workout to help empty your bowels. Also experiment with training at different times of the day. If you are a morning runner, drink a warm beverage (tea, coffee, water) to stimulate a bowel movement; then allow time to sit on the toilet to do your business prior to exercising. When exercising, visualize yourself having no intestinal problems. A positive mindset (as opposed to useless fretting) may control the problem.

The following nutrition tips might help you fuel wisely and reduce the symptoms:

- 1) **Eat less high fiber cereal.** Fiber increases fecal bulk and movement, thereby reducing transit time. High fiber = High risk of distress. Triathletes with a high [fiber](#) intake reported more GI complaints than those with a lower fiber intake.
- 2) **Limit "sugar-free" gum,** candies and foods that contain sorbitol, a type of sugar that can cause diarrhea.
- 3) **Keep a food & diarrhea chart to pinpoint food triggers.** For a week, eliminate any suspicious foods--excessive intakes of juice, coffee, fresh or dried fruits, beans, lentils, milk, high fiber breads and cereals, gels, commercial sports foods. Next, eat a big dose of the suspected food and observe changes in bowel movements. If you stop having diarrhea when you cut out bran cereal, but have a worrisome situation when you eat an extra-large portion, the answer becomes obvious: eat less bran cereal.
- 4) **Learn your personal transit time by eating sesame seeds, corn or beets--foods that can be seen in feces.** Because food moves through most people's intestines in 1 to 3 days, the trigger may be a food you ate a few days ago.
- 5) **Stay well-hydrated.** GI complaints are common in runners who have lost more than 4 percent of their body weight in sweat. (That's 6 lb. for a 150 lb. athlete.) Runners may think they got diarrhea because of the sports drink they consumed, but the diarrhea might have been related to dehydration.

6) **When all else fails, you might want to consult with your doctor** about timely use of anti-diarrhea medicine, such as Immodium. Perhaps that will be your saving grace.

### **The Bottom Line**

You are not alone with your concerns. Yet, your body is unique and you need to experiment with different food and exercise patterns to find a solution that brings peacefulness to your exercise program.

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