

Breakfast: The Most Important Meal of An Athlete's Day

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Without question, breakfast is the meal that makes champions. Unfortunately, many active people follow a lifestyle that eliminates breakfast or includes foods that are far from champion-builders.

I commonly counsel athletes who skip breakfast, grab only a light lunch, train on fumes, gorge at dinner and snack on "junk" until bedtime. They not only rob their bodies of the nutrients needed for health, but also lack energy for high-quality workouts.

A satisfying breakfast tends to invest in better health than does a grab-anything-in-sight dinner. Sarah, a collegiate athlete, learned that fueling her body's engine at the start of her day helps her feel more energetic and also able to choose better quality lunch and dinner foods.

That is, when she has granola, banana and juice in the morning, as well as a sandwich and yogurt for lunch, she stops devouring brownies after dinner.

Excuses to skip breakfast are abundant: "No time," "I'm not hungry in the morning" and "I don't like breakfast foods." Weight-conscious athletes pipe up, "My diet starts at breakfast."

These excuses are just that, excuses; they sabotage your sports performance.

Here's a look at the benefits of eating breakfast. I hope to convince you that breakfast is the most important meal of your sports diet.

Breakfast for the Morning Exerciser

If you exercise first thing in the morning, you may not want a big pre-exercise breakfast; too much food can feel heavy and uncomfortable. However, you can likely tolerate half a breakfast, such as half a bagel, a slice of toast, or a banana before your workout.

Just 100 to 300 calories can put a little carbohydrate into your system, boost your blood sugar so that you are running on fuel, not fumes, and enhance your performance.

You'll likely discover this small pre-exercise meal adds endurance and enthusiasm to your workout. In a research study, athletes who ate breakfast were able to exercise for 137 minutes as compared to only 109 minutes when they skipped this pre-exercise fuel.

After his morning workout, Jim, a banker, felt rushed and was more concerned about getting to work on time than eating breakfast. Using the excuse "No time," he overlooked the importance of refueling his muscles.

I reminded him: Muscles are most receptive to replacing depleted glycogen stores within the first two hours after the workout, regardless of whether or not the athlete feels hungry. I encouraged Jim to be responsible! Just as he chose to make time for exercise, he could also choose to make time for breakfast.

One simple post-exercise breakfast is fluids. Liquid breakfasts take minimal time to prepare and very little time to drink, yet they can supply the calories, water, carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals you need all in a travel mug. (You can always get coffee at the office.)

Because Jim felt thirsty after his morning workout, he found he could easily drink 16 ounces of juice or lowfat milk. Sometimes, he'd make a refreshing fruit smoothie with milk, banana and berries.

Later on mid-morning, when his appetite returned, Jim enjoyed the rest of his breakfast: (instant) oatmeal, multi-grain bagel with peanut butter, yogurt with granola, a banana or any other carbohydrate-rich foods that conveniently fit into his schedule.

This nutritious "second breakfast" refueled his muscles, abated hunger and curbed his lunchtime cookie cravings.

Breakfast for the Noon-time, Afternoon and Evening Exerciser

A hearty breakfast is important for people who exercise later in the day. It not only tames hunger but also provides the fuel needed for hard workouts.

Research has shown that athletes who ate breakfast, then four hours later enjoyed an energy bar five minutes before a noontime workout were able to exercise 20% harder at the end of the hourlong exercise test compared to when they ate no breakfast and no pre-exercise snack. (They worked 10 percent harder with only the snack.)

Breakfast works! Breakfast + a pre-exercise snack works even better!

What's for Breakfast?

From my perspective as a sports nutritionist, one of the simplest breakfasts of champions is a wholesome cereal with lowfat milk, banana and orange juice. This provides not only carbohydrates to fuel the muscles, but also protein (from the milk) to build strong muscles, and numerous other vitamins and minerals such as calcium, potassium, vitamin C, iron (if you choose enriched breakfast cereals) and fiber (if you choose bran cereals).

Equally important is the fact that cereal is quick and easy, requires no cooking, no preparation, no refrigeration. You can keep cereal at the office, bring milk to work and eat breakfast at the office. Breakfast is a good investment in a productive morning.

The Bottom Line

Breakfast works wonders for improving the quality of your diet. That is, eating breakfast results in less "junk food" later in the day. Breakfast also enhances weight control, sports performance, daily energy levels and future health. Breakfast is indeed the meal of champions. Make it a habit no excuses!

Sample Grab-and-go Sports Breakfasts

- Bran muffin plus a vanilla yogurt
- Two slices of last night's left-over thick-crust pizza
- Peanut butter-banana-honey sandwich
- Pita with one to two slices of lowfat cheese plus a large apple
- Baggie of lowfat granola with a handful of raisins (preceded by 8 oz. lowfat milk before you dash out the door)
- Cinnamon raisin bagel (one large or two small) plus a can of vegetable juice

