

# SportsNutrition

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## THE PRE-COMPETITION MEAL

When it comes to pre-competition eating, you have to learn through trial and error what foods and fluids work best for your body. No one food or "magic meal" will ensure top performance. Some athletes (such as those in sports involving running and jumping) may prefer to eat nothing for four hours before an event. But most people perform better after having eaten a small, 100 to 300 calorie snack within one hour, or a moderate 300 to 600 calorie meal within three hours of the event. The goal of this pre-competition meal is to enhance stamina and endurance without causing any stomach discomfort. The meal or snack helps:

- maintain a normal blood sugar and prevent performance problems associated with hypoglycemia, such as light-headedness, blurred vision, needless fatigue, inability to concentrate, and indecisiveness.
- settle the stomach, absorb some of the gastric juices, and prevent feelings of hunger.
- provide energy to fuel the muscles. Despite popular belief, your body can digest the food you eat before you exercise and put it to good use!

Just as eating too much pre-exercise food can have adverse effects (nausea, stomach cramps), so can eating too little food (low energy). The following guidelines offer points to consider regarding your own personal pre-exercise eating program. Because each person is unique, you must experiment to learn which foods—and how much of them—work best for you.

1. Choose primarily carbohydrates before an event because they digest quickly and are readily available for fuel. Some popular choices include bananas, cereal, bread, bagel, crackers, and pasta. A little protein and fat are OK to eat for sustained energy, but large portions of fried foods, peanut butter, cheeseburgers, or other fatty meals will linger in the stomach and may feel heavy, uncomfortable and talk back to you.

2. Pay attention to meal timing. In general, you should allow 3 to 5 hours for a large meal to digest; 2 to 3 hours for a smaller meal, 1 to 2 hours for a blenderized meal (liquids are absorbed more rapidly than solid foods), 0 to 1 hour for a small snack. As well, eat extra carbohydrates the day prior to a competitive event and do little or no exercise so your muscles can best refuel.

**Before morning events:** Eat a hearty, high carbohydrate dinner and bedtime snack the prior night. That morning, eat a light meal (such as 1 to 2 slices of toast and/or cereal) as tolerated to stabilize your blood sugar, absorb some of the gastric juices, and keep you from feeling hungry.

**Before afternoon events:** Eat a hearty breakfast and a lighter carbohydrate-based lunch.

**Before evening events:** Eat a hearty breakfast and lunch, then a light meal as tolerated 1-2 hours prior.

Some athletes break all the rules and enjoy a big meal within an hour of the event and suffer no digestive problems. Others prefer to eat nothing for four hours prior. *You simply have to experiment during training* to determine what foods (if any) settle comfortably, when you should eat them (one, two, or three hours prior?), and how much you can eat.

3. If you get very nervous or have a sensitive stomach, you may prefer to eat nothing before the event. In that case, you should make a special effort to eat extra *the day before* to help compensate for lack of event-day fuel.

4. Always eat familiar foods prior to competition. Do not try anything new! Experiment with new foods *during training* to determine if they settle well, cause "acid stomach", gas, heart burn, cramps, or intestinal discomfort.

5. Eat a carbohydrate-based diet *every day* to prevent chronic glycogen depletion and ensure adequate glycogen replacement. One high-carb pre-event meal does not compensate for a week of inadequate eating.

6. When traveling, plan to bring your favorite sports foods such as a tried-and-true cereal, energy bar, fruit, or sandwich. This way, you can worry less about fueling yourself and be free to focus on performing.

7. The pre-competition meal may have a greater *psychological* than physiological value. For example, if you firmly believe that a steak dinner helps you perform best, then eat it even though this meal "breaks the rules" regarding pre-game suggestions! But also be sure to accompany the steak with a noodle-type soup, potato, rolls, vegetables, juice and other carbohydrate-rich foods that will fuel your muscles. The steak simply fills your stomach and is a poor source of muscle fuel.

### Sample high carbohydrate, low fat pre-competition food suggestions:

**Breakfasts:** oatmeal, cold cereal, lowfat milk, banana, toast, juice, muffin, bagel, yogurt, french toast, pancakes.

**Lunches:** sandwich with hearty bread but little mayo, noodle soup, thick-crust pizza w/ single cheese, no meat.

**Snacks:** crackers, cereal, bagel, toast, canned or fresh fruit, yogurt, energy bar, small turkey sandwich, leftover pasta.

**Dinners:** spaghetti with tomato sauce; a small serving of chicken with extra rice, noodles, potato, or rolls.