

Road Food: 5 Nutrition Tips to Follow When You Travel

road food

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Runner's World*

When Maureen Ackerly won the 2008 Napa Valley Marathon, earning a spot at the Olympic Trials, she thanked two people for helping her realize the dream: her husband/coach and the hotel manager at her wine country lodge. Her husband had Fed-Exed Ackerly's favorite pancake mix in advance to guarantee his wife would have exactly the same prerace meal she's eaten for years. And the hotel manager agreed to have the kitchen whip up a batch of the cornmeal shortcakes. Yes, Ackerly admits she's a control freak. But the stakes were high, she says, so sticking to her eating routine was crucial to her efforts.

Many traveling runners — from elite to recreational — have paid the price of letting their good nutrition habits fall apart on the road. Overeating at restaurants can make you sluggish. Skimping on meals (due to logistical reasons or lack of healthy options) can cause midrun meltdowns. And the most feared pitfall — consuming something that irritates the GI system — will sabotage your trip, whether your itinerary includes a Rock 'n' Roll Marathon or a long trail run in the Rocky Mountains. By keeping these simple strategies in mind, you can avoid the perils of road food — without seizing control of your hotel's kitchen.

Travel Smart: Know Your Needs

Lots of runners think they have to stick to high-carb, low-fat, low-fiber foods in the days before a big run. But exactly what you eat is less important than knowing what you can eat. "You've got to train the gut," says Jackie Dikos, R. D., a nutritionist and competitive runner. The key is to test out different prerun meals, take note of how your system handles them, and remember what works (and doesn't) for you. If you know your prerace fave is chicken-vegetable stir-fry with white rice, you can search out Chinese restaurants. If you must have coffee before morning runs, you can make sure your hotel offers in-room coffeemakers (or an on-site Dunkin' Donuts).

Travel Smart: Pack For Transit

You have less control over what and when you eat on travel days. So if you want to make smart nutrition choices while in transit, "you can't leave home empty-handed," says Suzanne Girard Eberle, R. D., a board-certified sports dietitian and author of *Endurance Sports Nutrition*. Foods that are high in protein are satisfying and help keep you feeling full, so Eberle counsels clients to pack high-protein snacks like string cheese and hard-boiled eggs, which stay fresh for a few hours in a cooler or wrapped in tin foil. Remember to also bring a snack such as a bagel with cheese, or a granola bar) to tide you over once you land or while driving to your hotel.

Travel Smart: Stock Up

Rather than stress over where your next meal will come from, pack food that will last for most of your vacation. "Too much mental energy can be spent overthinking food," says Eberle. For road trips, Dikos suggests filling a cooler with sturdy snacks like apples and oranges, cheese, bread, hummus, carrot sticks, and even sliced turkey. Dry goods like energy bars, granola, trail mix, crackers, and peanut butter will keep in your car trunk or checked luggage. Hit a local supermarket once you arrive at your destination or to restock midway through your trip.

Travel Smart: Remember the Drinks

According to a 2008 review article by the Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, the dry air onboard planes causes a gradual fluid loss, so if you rely on the airline's tiny (and infrequent) rations of water, you're likely to land parched. To avoid dehydration, have at least one energy drink on your travel day. "Sports drinks contain sodium, which aids fluid retention," says Dikos. To navigate pesky airport liquid restrictions, pack an empty water bottle and a stash of

single-serving sports drink powders and hit a water fountain, or ask the flight attendant to fill it once you're on board.

Travel Smart: Have a Plan B

If the airline loses your luggage filled with your pantry stash; if your favorite restaurant has an hour-long wait; if your spaghetti arrives smothered in spicy sauce — don't let the snafu rattle you. "There's the worry that every bite is the only determining factor in your performance," says Eberle. "Try not to get locked into the mentality of, 'I must eat perfectly.'" To avoid a food panic, try to remain flexible — and choose easy-to-find foods. Eberle used to eat cheese pizza before her races. Andy Martin is a two-time Olympic Trials qualifier who travels once a month to race and almost always eats his prerace dinner at an Italian restaurant. Last year's Big Sur Marathon tested his resolve. "I didn't do any research ahead of time, so I drove around for a while looking for a pasta place," he says. "I finally settled for pancakes and sausage at a diner." How did Martin's plan B work for him on race day? He won.

Got Snacks? Check!

Healthy, handy single-serving foods for the road

Sports Drinks

One Gatorade Thirst Quencher powder pack mixes up to 17 ounces.

Energy Bars

Clif Bars and Kashi TLC Bars supply both carbs and protein.

Instant Oatmeal

Heat water in the hotel coffeemaker.

Granola

Top your yogurt with Bear Naked Snack-Packs.

Honey

Snag single-serving packets at any fast-food joint.

Crackers

Kashi TLC crackers are 130 calories a bag.

Fruit

Apples, oranges, and bananas hold up well.

String Cheese

A good source of low-fat protein.

Hard-Boiled Eggs

Be sure to peel before you leave.

Hummus

Try squeeze-tubes of Wild Garden hummus.

Carrots

Mini snack bags pair perfectly with hummus.

Chocolate

Portion control with individual squares.