

The Pack Rules: Eating and Drinking

Essential advice from runners and readers.

By Yishane Lee

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1. EAT BEFORE

If you're heading out for an hour or more, you need some fuel at least 30 minutes before you run. "I generally go with the three-to-one carbs-to-protein ratio," says Anna Wood of New York City, who likes whole-grain cereal with milk. Carbs provide energy, and protein and just a little fat help it last. "Peanut butter settles well in my stomach, and since it is high in protein and fat, it provides lasting energy throughout long workouts," says Jenny Jensen of Redmond, Washington. Other favorite boosts are honey on toast, oatmeal, bananas and peanut butter, fruit and nuts, granola, and energy bars. "When I run, I plan out the snack I'm going to eat after I'm done." -Liz Lawrence Atasacadero, California

2. OR SIP SOMETHING

If you're rolling out of bed, not starving, and only going for a few miles, you probably don't need anything more than a few sips of whatever gets you going. "As an early morning runner, I rarely eat, but I always have several cups of coffee," says Erik Petersen of Eugene, Oregon. Good choice, since numerous studies have shown that caffeine boosts performance during exercise. Dennis Ang of Hong Kong likes a prerun Red Bull, while Jordan Paxhia of Brookline, Massachusetts, drinks Emergen-C. "If I run in the morning, a Diet Coke is a must!" says Lisa Allison of St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

3. CARRY CANDY

You'll need to refuel on the run if you're going out for longer than 75 minutes. "I carry jelly beans and water for runs over 13 miles," says Lisa Allison of Minnesota. Jane Cullis of Toronto prefers gummy bears, while Sarah Dreier of Appleton, Wisconsin, is a Swedish Fish fanatic. Like candy, GUs, Sport Beans, Shot Bloks, gels, and energy bars all provide easily accessible carbs. "Dried fruits and raw nuts add salt and sugar and they're calorically dense, so I don't have to carry many!" says Kristin Field of Corona, California.

4. DRINK WHILE YOU'RE OUT

For runs less than 45 minutes, water is enough. Hour-long runs require replenishing with carbs as well as electrolytes, and sports drinks do the trick. "I drink half water and half Gatorade," says Wendy Cohen of El Cajon, California. "I sip small amounts every 15 minutes." Eric Bubna of Andover, Minnesota, finds out what drink will be served at his upcoming races and practices with that. "It's important for your body to get used to it," he says. To go hands-free, use a fuel belt, stash bottles along your route before your run, or map a course that goes by water fountains or convenience stores.

5. RUN TO THE FRIDGE

Postexercise, aim to refuel within the "glycogen recovery window" of 30 to 60 minutes, says Len James of Savannah, Georgia. It's when your body most needs the nutrients in order to repair muscle tissue and replace glycogen stores. "I try to eat immediately after I run, usually a good mix of protein and carbs," says Christian Taylor of New Holland, Pennsylvania. Jack Genovese of Amherst, New York, likes pancakes and a Slim Fast. "I go with what I am craving, which is mostly carbs with a little fat and protein, like a smoothie with banana, berry, honey, and soymilk, and half of a tuna sandwich," says New York's Anna Wood. "Eating properly makes me functional for the remainder of the day," says Ricardo J. Salvador of Battle Creek, Michigan.

6. POUR CHOCOLATE

"After a half-marathon or longer, I can't eat right away," says Bill Kirby. "My wife hands me a cold bottle of chocolate milk that I immediately down." A 2006 Indiana University study found that low-fat chocolate milk, with its optimal carbs to protein ratio, was just as effective as Gatorade at speeding recovery after exercise. And it doesn't have to be cold. Brooklyn, New York, chocolatier Jacques Torres drank his own hot chocolate at mile 20 of the New York City Marathon in 2002. "When people smelled it, they all wanted some," he says. Smoothies and protein shakes are good options, too. "I go for Carnation Instant Breakfast, which has quick carbs, protein, and vitamins," says Chris Mateer of Webster, New York.

7. CARB UP

Any complex carbohydrates you enjoy are a good choice the night (or day) before a race, long run, or hard workout. "My favorite meal the night before a marathon is pizza because it's loaded with carbs and protein. I did this before my first marathon, and it's been a tradition since," says marathoner Bryan Krasovskis of Niagara Falls, Ontario. "I notice a difference when I get quality carbs-complex carbs and nutrient-dense carbs like veggies," says Dreier.

8. BE WARY

Meat, dairy, high-fat foods, and fiber too close to your effort may make you just run to the porta-potty. "When I eat meat before I run, it tries to make its way back up," says Carlo de la Rama of Jersey City, New Jersey. "For afternoon runs, I'll avoid dairy, meat, and fiber, like apples, at lunchtime," says Rosemary Walzer of Milwaukee. "Fiber found in whole wheat makes you have to go to the bathroom," says Michael Borodynko of Sewell, New Jersey. "Too much fatty food of any sort gives me gastric problems for the next few days, so I get most of my fat from almonds, avocados, and the occasional chunk of cheese," says Lena Warden of Albuquerque. "Steer clear of burritos," says Megan Lacey of Walla Walla, Washington, who learned the hard way. "I train hard, so why not enjoy a piece of cake here and there?" -Avery Adams Georgetown, Kentucky

9. BE BORING

"I stick with what I know, and I do not try new food items before a workout or race," says Henry Tong of Union City, New Jersey. "It's all about avoiding cramps while maintaining fuel and minerals," says R.O. Bonacquisti III. If you do try something new, just make sure it's healthy. Olympic marathoner Deena Kastor ate low-fat, high-carb Chinese food the night before winning the 2008 Olympic Marathon Trials in Boston. "My husband got take-out from P.F. Chang's," she says. "I'd never eaten Chinese food the night before a race. And he said, 'Well, you are trying to make the team for Beijing.'"

10. THEN HAVE FUN

"After a torturous long run, the best reward for me is a cheeseburger and an ice-cold beer," says Daniel Guajardo of Austin, Texas. Finishing a marathon means 12 ounces of premium Japanese Wagyu beef for Dennis Ang of Tai Koo Shing, Hong Kong. "I reward myself with a few adult drinks after races. When you train for months, you deserve them," says Josh Boots of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Julia Weisenborn of Bowling Green, Ohio, goes for ice cream. "Any kind," she says. "Large amounts."

Carb Faves:

Pasta 44%

Rice 9%

Bagel 11%

Energy bar 3%

Cereal 17%

Beer 16%