

Nutrition

Eat Like A Runner

You're burning a tremendous amount of calories as you train, but that doesn't mean you can eat whatever you want. There is an expression: "You can't out-train a bad diet." You can get away with a bad diet from a calorie perspective, but that doesn't mean it's going to help your performance and, more importantly, your overall health. Before we talk about what to eat, let's talk about how to eat. Eating according to a schedule is beneficial to everyone—but especially runners. Your body is a machine, and you can think of food as the fuel that keeps that engine running smoothly. You never want the tank to run low. Three meals and three snacks are the best way to go.

Sample Meal Schedule

7:00AM Breakfast

9:30AM Snack

12:00PM Lunch

3:00PM Snack

6:00PM Dinner

8:30PM Snack

You never should go more than three hours between eating. The benefits are a faster metabolism, which triggers the body to release body fat. And the bonus for runners is that a steady blood sugar level translates to steady energy. Many people are reluctant to adopt this eating pattern for fear of increasing their daily caloric intake. In reality, your net caloric intake drops because when you get to your meal times, you are not starving and you wind up eating less. The other benefit of not starving is that you will make better food choices. When we are hungry, we tend to go for whatever is quickest and not necessarily the healthiest.

Menu Options

Breakfast

- A healthy grain cereal with dairy milk
- Yogurt with granola
- Oatmeal with dairy milk and berries
- Protein shake
- Yogurt and fruit smoothie
(You can super-charge any of the above by adding chia seeds.)
- Hard-boiled eggs with toast

Lunch

- Fish, chicken, or eggs in a green salad (*Make it a crunchy salad with plenty of veggies.*)
- Fish, chicken, or eggs with quinoa and a green leafy vegetable
- Fish, chicken, or eggs in a pasta salad
- Lentil soup with a green salad
- Beans with green salad (*Super-charge with tuna.*)

Dinner (*includes lunch choices plus the below*)

- Grilled chicken with a green salad and vegetables
- Brown rice with beans and a green salad
- Turkey burger or roasted chicken with grilled vegetables
- Chicken stir-fry with vegetables and rice
- Baked chicken with a salad and sweet potatoes
- Salmon with brown rice

Snacks

- Yogurt
- Protein shake
- Handful of almonds
- Peanut butter on crackers (*Try natural peanut butter*)
- Protein bar
- Banana or berries

Two Superfoods

Quinoa

This superfood is a grain that's not really a grain. As a runner, you need to work it into your diet. Quinoa is a clean, healthy, low glycemic carb. Other grains may have higher protein content, but quinoa is full of essential amino acids, making it as close as you are going to get to a grain with a complete protein profile. It's also high in fiber, vitamins, and minerals. You couldn't design a better nutrition source. It takes on the flavor of anything you add to it. Throw in chicken, fish or eggs—add your favorite spices and herbs for the perfect meal.

Chia Seeds

This superfood is an all-natural seed packed with clean carbohydrates, protein, and fiber. And there's more: it is full of omega-3 (alpha linolenic acid, ALA) fatty acids. ALA helps support the body's normal cardiovascular function. Add it to cereal, yogurt, or protein shakes for a potent power boost.

You'll notice I've included dairy milk with breakfast. There is no reason to stay away from it unless you have lactose issues. Calcium is important for women and bone density. If you have lactose issues, instead of going the supplement route, choose calcium-dense foods such as fortified non-dairy milk, tofu made with calcium sulfate, leafy greens, or fortified orange juice.

Choose clean foods with a balance of carbohydrates, protein, and fiber. Carbohydrates are essential to runners: it's the body's first choice for energy production. So, why should runners add protein and fiber along with their much-needed carbohydrates? First, protein is vital to the runner. We tear muscle fiber every time we run. We need the protein with a full amino acid profile to help the body repair those tears and come back stronger. Fiber helps maintain digestion, a healthy heart, and skin. It also helps improve blood sugar levels and aids in weight management.

If you're a vegetarian (or cut a lot of meat from your diet), you have to be vigilant in food combining to get that full amino acid profile. Mixing quinoa (superfood) with your legumes is the easiest way to do that. Natural peanut butter should be a staple in your diet. Take the menu options I suggested above and replace the meat with legumes and quinoa. Be wary of low-fat foods. These foods are usually loaded with sugar to replace the flavor lost when the fat was removed. Hidden sugars can be found in seemingly healthy foods. Most store-bought breads are loaded with high-fructose corn syrup, which should be avoided at all costs. Start reading labels: a lot of supposed healthy foods contain high-fructose corn syrup. The top one that comes to mind is yogurt. Get Greek or full-fat yogurt, and look for kinds using pure cane sugar as sweetener.

Pre-Race Nutrition

Before a race, you obviously need a carbohydrate source, but you do want to pair a protein with it. Glycogen enters the blood stream faster when there is a four-to-one ratio of carbohydrates to protein. Think about having some peanut butter with your bagel or a handful of almonds. Fruit with nuts is another good choice. Whatever you choose, make sure you tried it during your training. You want to make sure it agrees with you.

Gels, Chews, Sport Beans, and more!

As you begin your training and long runs, it's a great time to try a variety of gels, sport beans, chews, and more. These items help replenish carbohydrates that are depleted during running. Take your time to find the right item that works best for your long runs. This will help you continue to make progress during your training and set you up for success on race day. It's so crucial to not try anything new on race day and go with what is best for your body.

Each item will have directions printed on the label, but a good rule of thumb is to replenish every 45 to 60 minutes during your long runs.

Nutrition for Recovery

You want to replace your stored glycogen, so carbohydrates are a must. You've also torn a tremendous amount of muscle fiber, so protein is equally important. The easiest thing to do is down a protein shake right after your race.

There are three steps: rehydration, replenishment and repair. Once you finish a long run, it's essential that you rehydrate with fluids, electrolytes, and easily-absorbed carbs. A sports drink fits these criteria perfectly. If you can't take another sip of Powerade, then take water with pretzels. If the cells are dehydrated, you can't transport or absorb nutrients.

Replenishment is the next step, and this should be 20 to 30 minutes after you finish. You want carbs, protein and preferably some antioxidants to help deal with the oxidative stress you just placed on your body. A sandwich with protein and a piece of fruit is perfect.

Repair is the third, often-ignored stage. After a long run, many people reward themselves with junk food. Now is actually the time to make sure you get quality nutrition. Introduce both carbs and protein, with the emphasis on protein—it helps repair muscles. Add vegetables and fruit, and you'll supply yourself with everything your body needs to repair itself while you sleep.

One last tip: strive to eat healthy, but make room for cheat days and the things you enjoy. Everything should be done in moderation.