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Diet and nutrition for competitive swimmers

Correct nutrition can affect your performance by as much as 20%, so we've put together some helpful hints.

Forget trying to outswim a bad diet. To get results and up your performance you need to eat smart. Here, we explain how. You put in the hours in the pool, work hard and stick to your training plan but if it all goes wrong in the kitchen, you could be selling yourself short. Don't let a poor diet ruin your hard work and training. Instead, maximise your swimming performance by feeding your body with the nutritious, energy-rich foods it needs.

How many calories do competitive swimmers need?

The amount of energy you need depends on your training, your size, your weight and your muscle mass. However, as a benchmark, a 60kg swimmer will burn between 800-1000 calories in an hour-long training session. Add this to your average daily calorie needs – around 1800 calories for a woman and 2000 for a man – and you can roughly work out how much you need to eat a day. But remember that no two swimmers' needs, or training plans are the same so find the food and diet approach that work for you. Assessing your energy levels and hunger is a good way to work out if you're getting enough calories throughout the day.

What do competitive swimmers need to eat?

A pre-race burger may be the choice of some elite swimmers before a meet, but it's unlikely to work for the rest of us. A diet rich in complex carbohydrates (wholegrains, green veg, beans and sweet potatoes for example) and lean protein (chicken and fish) will provide the energy you need to perform at your best in the pool. Aim for carbs to make up half of your meal and ensure that you include protein (to aid muscle repair after a swim) at every sitting, along with vegetables and good fats such as avocado, cashew nuts, pumpkin seeds or coconut flesh.

How often should I eat?

Competitive swimming is a high-energy workout, so eating frequent, smaller, nutrient-dense meals is important – this should satisfy your appetite, keep your blood sugar balanced and your energy levels consistently high. Opt for this approach over the traditional three, large meals a day, which may leave you feeling lethargic in training and when competing. If you're a morning swimmer try to get some calories in before getting into the pool; swimming after a 12-hour, overnight fast can leave you feeling depleted, and ravenous for hours after.

What should I eat before and after training?

Eating carbohydrate and protein-rich foods such as eggs, wholemeal bread, pasta, beans and chicken around 2-3 hours before a swim is recommended. Pre- and post-training session snacks and meals are important to help keep blood sugar levels balanced, particularly immediately after a swim. Aim to refuel your body within 20-30 minutes of training with a mix of muscle-repairing protein and glycogen-restoring carbohydrates – a banana and peanut butter sandwich would be perfect. Avoid fatty foods which put extra demands on your digestive system and cut all nutritionally empty food from your diet. Instead, opt for healthy, light snacks such as fresh fruit, smoothies, whole grains, nuts, seeds, protein shakes and cereal bars.

When and what should I drink?

Dehydration can affect your energy levels and performance; therefore, you must always make sure your body is fully hydrated. This means you should always carry a drinks bottle with you to the poolside and drink plenty before, during and after your training.

- Water is fine in most situations or you can add your favourite cordial if you prefer. If you do use cordial, try and opt for a 'reduced sugar' version.
- Sports supplements can be used, as they are an extra way of obtaining carbohydrate.
- Caffeine has a dehydration effect, so try and avoid drinking tea and coffee.
- Fluid requirements increase as temperature increases. Therefore, if you find yourself on a hot poolside, which is often the case, remember to drink plenty.
- Avoid very fizzy drinks or very concentrated drinks as these can cause stomach discomfort during exercise.

Always remember – if you are thirsty you are already dehydrated.



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The 3 steps to a swimmer diet

There are three main food groups that must be included in your everyday meals:

Carbohydrates

The quickest way to get energy is through carbohydrates. Your body's muscles use carbohydrates as their first source of energy, therefore if you need a lot of energy you need to eat a lot of carbohydrates. The best food for obtaining a high carbohydrate diet are: -

- Bread
- Pasta
- Rice
- Potatoes
- Cereals
- Peas
- Beans

Protein

Moderate amounts of protein are needed to help build muscles, which will make you stronger. Foods that are high in protein are: -

- Meats (lean and preferably grilled)
- Fish
- Eggs
- Milk
- Cheese
- Yoghurts
- Fromage Frais
- Beans
- Pulses
- Nuts
- Cereals

Fats

Fats are needed in your diet, but only in small amounts. Fatty foods include all of the nice foods! Such as: -

- Chocolate
- Crisps
- Cakes
- Pastries
- Margarine
- Butter

But remember...only in small amounts!

Balance

The balance of these three food groups is very important. Each meal you eat should be mainly carbohydrate based, with a smaller section of protein and the smallest amount being from fatty foods. Fruit and vegetables should be included a lot in your diet either with a main meal or just snacks throughout the day.

You should aim to eat little and often to keep your energy reserves full ready for your training. So, as well as your three main meals of the day you should try and eat a mid-morning and mid-afternoon snack. This however, should be something that is high in carbohydrates and low in fat. For example, a banana is an excellent option!



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The night before a gala

Eat a high carbohydrate, low fat meal, with plenty of fluid. Try some of the following: -

- Rice or pasta with a low-fat sauce
- Jacket potato with a low-fat filling
- Beans on toast
- Noodles (preferably cooked with little oil)

Pre-competition meals

Only eat foods that you are used to - Don't experiment with new foods prior to a gala!

Breakfast (2-4 hours before event)

- Breakfast cereal or porridge with low fat milk and fresh fruit
- Toast or bread with ham or honey; low fat yogurt
- English muffins with honey or jam

Pre-competition lunches (2-4 hours before event)

- Sandwiches or rolls with tuna, cottage cheese or chicken; fresh fruit
- Pasta or rice with tomato-based sauce; fresh fruit
- Baked potato with low fat filling; fresh fruit

Pre-competition snacks (1 hour before event)

- Fruit mixtures, e.g. apples, bananas, oranges, grapes, kiwi fruit
- Dried apricots
- Low fat fruit yogurt or rice pudding
- Mini or scotch pancake



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Between races

Between Races

The length of time between races, as well as individual preferences, will determine your food selection. As a general rule, if there is less than one hour between races, your choice will be limited to drinks rather than food. If you have longer and are sure that you are able to tolerate food, then select carbohydrate rich meals or snack to boost energy levels. There is a café at most open meets, but it is always busy, so we recommend you bring your own lunch if you are staying for both sessions – that means NO CHIPS!

Guidelines for eating between heats and events

- Less than one hour
 - Sports drinks
 - Carbohydrate supplements
 - Soft drinks (diluted fruit juice and cordial)
 - Bananas and raisins
 - Energy bars
 - Jelly cubes
 - Plain biscuits
 - Rice cakes
 - Nuts
- 2-4 hours
 - Sandwiches filled with honey, jam, bananas
 - Current buns/tea cakes
 - Bagels/muffins/crumpets
 - Scones/scotch pancakes
 - Toast/toasted sandwiches
 - Popcorn
 - Canned fruit or dried fruit
 - Low fat rice pudding
 - Pasta and tomato type sauce
 - Jacket potato
 - Rice

Fluid

It is vital to continue to drink throughout the day. Carry a drinks bottle with you at all times. Always drink before you feel thirsty.

Which drink is best?

- Squash/diluted fruit juice
- Water
- Glucose drinks

Avoid

- Fizzy drinks
- Caffeine



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After the gala

It is just as important to choose the right food to eat after your swimming session. You know have to consider refuelling your body and helping it to recover quickly. Instant recovery foods are available that can be eaten within 20-30 minutes of finishing your swim. Protein helps to repair the muscles, while carbohydrates help to restore your body's glycogen levels. If you're able to eat a healthy meal after swimming, aim to do so within an hour or so after finishing your session. Avoid fatty foods and refuel with high carbohydrate foods.

For swimmers on the go, instant recovery foods are extremely useful. Recovery drinks or recovery bars will provide protein to start repairing muscle fibres and recharge energy levels. For your main after-swim meal, you should also be looking for good sources of lean proteins. Tasty options include lean chicken, turkey or oily fish with a baked sweet potato or brown rice.

Snacks for competition

Here are some excellent options for snacks during competitions: -

- Sandwiches (try bananas/jam/honey)
- Rolls/pitta bread
- Muesli bars and dried fruit bars
- Popcorn
- Fresh/dried/canned fruit
- Rusks or dried cereals
- Current buns/tea cakes/Malt loaf/Raisin bread
- Sesame snacks
- Sesame sticks
- Fruit cake
- Plain type biscuits, e.g. rich tea/digestive/garibaldi/fig rolls
- Pop tarts
- Jelly cubes
- Scones/muffins/brioche/crumpets
- Bowl cereal
- Toast
- Carton low fat rice pudding
- Low fat fruit yogurts
- Crispbreads/rice cakes/crackers
- Slice pizza (thick base)
- Bread pudding/cheese buns/scotch pancakes

Avoid

- Sweets, such as Haribo, fruit gums, pastilles, etc. All are slow to digest and only give a short spike of energy.
- Avoid fizzy drinks or ice drink. All are high in sugars