

FUNDAMENTALS OF SPORTS NUTRITION

Sports Nutrition is indeed a specific science when it comes to high-performance, elite athletes. However, it need not be a daunting subject for the general fitness enthusiast. It essentially follows the same fundamental rules as general, well balanced nutrition except with slightly different proportions of foods required.

Following a training programme correctly is a basic requirement for success at any event and following a good diet plays an equally important role in achieving one's athletic goals. Like a high-performance vehicle, the speed and distance travelled is dependent on the amount and quality of fuel on board.

Here are some of the fundamental “rules” that you can bear in mind when planning your diet for endurance running.

1) BALANCE

Some marathon runners, especially those new to the event, believe that a diet based on a huge amount of Carbohydrate foods is the only way to eat. Wrong. While Carbohydrate foods are indeed necessary, they need to be balanced by the correct amount of Proteins, Fats, Vitamins and Minerals together with adequate fluid intakes.

2) VARIETY

Just as you shouldn't train in exactly the same way every day, thus you shouldn't eat the same foods every day. This restricts your overall nutrient intake. If you eat the same foods day in day out then you miss out on all of the valuable nutrients available in all of the foods you DONT eat! Aim to eat at the very least, a different lunch and main meal every day.

3) ENERGY FOOD

Yes, these are the Carbohydrate-based foods much favoured by endurance runners. However, not all Carbohydrates are the same and the ones to focus on primarily are the starchy, low GI foods that will give a sustained release of energy. Starchy foods to include would be wholegrain breads and cereals, wholegrain pasta and rice, jacket potatoes and sweet potatoes, pulses (peas, beans, lentils) and root vegetables such as carrots, parsnips etc.

The types of carbohydrate foods you should limit in the diet would be the sweet, sugary types that can lead to unstable blood sugar levels and “cravings”. This results in energy slumps and also poor running performance. So, enjoy occasionally and in small amounts, foods such as sweets, biscuits, cakes, jams, sugar, chocolate, sweetened breakfast cereals and fizzy drinks.

4) PROTEIN FOODS

The downfall of many athletes, especially endurance athletes, is that they neglect to eat enough protein, especially females. It is believed that we need just 1.2 – 1.8g per Kg of bodyweight per day. In reality we need much more than this. Protein forms the structure of our bodies, muscles, tendons, ligaments, hair, skin, nails and even bones!! Without it we would have weak and flabby bodies, lack strength and be more prone to illness and injury....not a good recipe for success as a runner.

Ideally have some protein at each meal. Good choices would be lean meats (also essential for iron)

fish, poultry, eggs and calcium rich dairy foods. Vegetarian and Vegan athletes need to be very careful that they correctly balance their food groups in order to get adequate protein i.e. Eat grain based foods with pulses, nuts and soya products.

5) FATS

Not all fats are bad and here again athletes view fat as the enemy and try to strip them out of their diets. We certainly need to avoid the trans / saturated fats found in processed spreads and margerines, commercially produced ready-meals, cakes and biscuits, take-aways, deep-fried foods and foods with batter / breadcrumb coatings. These are the fats that raise cholesterol levels and increase the risk of both heart-disease and certain cancers. On the other hand, good fats such as those found in Oily fish (Salmon, Trout, Mackerel, Sardines, Herring) Avocados, Olive oil, Flax seed are the protective fats that we need for healthy immunity. These fats also have an anti-inflammatory effect in the body.

6) VITAMINS AND MINERALS

Eating five or more portions of both fruit and vegetables per day would be ideal for athletes. This would boost levels of anti-oxidants, needed to combat the trauma of hard training and competing. While fresh is best, frozen vegetables are also good. Remember to vary the type and colour of your produce for best effect.

I hope these basic guidelines will help you to structure a more balanced eating plan and that you will see the results reflected in both your training and racing.