

Diet and Nutrition for Runners

(AKA: Food!)

There are countless diets for runners and you need to find what works for you. Whether you're full Paleo, Vegan, Vegetarian, or a more conventional eater – what food rules have worked for you?

Whether you're new to running or an experienced athlete, what you eat can be a mine-field. There are plenty of runners (and I often include myself in this category!!) who eat pretty rubbish diets sometimes- but if you are wanting to improve your health and maybe even your running, here are a few pointers:

1. Stock up your house with real food. The term “real food” means minimally processed with as few ingredients as possible. Think:

- High-quality sources of protein
- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Beans
- Nuts
- Whole grains i.e. Brown Rice / Wild Rice / Bulgar wheat

By stocking up on ‘real food’, you’ll need to get rid of all the processed stuff and junk food. Here’s your chance to have some fun: don’t throw it away, eat it! Have a cheat weekend where you only eat junk food and processed food.

Not only will you rid your home of unhealthy food, you’ll be craving the healthy stuff.

2. Don't be a zealot – cheat on your diet regularly. Perfection can be the enemy of the good and you need to let yourself enjoy food that you love. What you *usually do* is more important than what you *sometimes do*.

Remember that your diet can be more flexible after long runs or hard workouts. Your body is craving more calories and carbohydrates so cake or slice of pizza can actually be a good thing.

3. Cut back on your sugar intake (but be realistic about your carb needs as a distance runner). Every runner knows that carbohydrates provide the best fuel for running and that most runners don't [carbo-load for the marathon](#) properly.

But on a day to day level there's no need to consume so much sugar. Do you really need an energy drink before your easy 5 miler? Are two plates of spaghetti necessary on a day you didn't run at all?

4. Vegetables are the best food group for you. They're calorie poor, nutrient dense, and usually have very little sugar. You should try to eat at least 5 servings a day.

5. Enjoy your food! Try new things, cook differently, use wacky spices. Sautee your vegetables instead of boiling them. Bake them instead of sauteing. Use a slow cooker instead.

Fuelling For Your Long Runs

Running can seem like the easiest sport in the world until you actually get up off the couch and into that 5k. Any regular runner will tell you how difficult those early runs are (heavy legs and achy knees are par for the course). But the beauty of running is the consistent improvements you should see in your performance. That's until you hit a second wall, and this is where properly fueling yourself before, during, and after your runs is vital. And most of this advice is for longer runs of over an hour.. For most club runs fueling is not so important– although on the odd occasion the weather is actually hot, fluids will be advisable.

How you fuel, and what with (gels / bars / jelly babies/bananas) is highly personal; but what is universal is that if you don't eat on long runs it will make them very uncomfortable! And what you eat after, will determine how quickly you recover.

“A runner's nutritional needs will fluctuate with how many miles they do and what their goals are in terms of their performance and body composition,” says dietician [Sophie Medlin](#). “There isn't a particular diet that runners need to follow or any special foods we need to eat. In the same way as everyone else, runners need a good balance of [protein](#), healthy fats, and wholegrain carbohydrates.”

There are still some useful things to keep in mind that apply specifically to runners though, which we will all explore in the following article.

There are diets that aim to reduce or eliminate carbs, however personally I like my carbs, and it is a primary and easily digestible source of energy during runs.

How To Fuel Yourself Before A Long Run

So you're at your front door, ready to go; but have you eaten? You need to fuel up and you need to

be tactical about when you do so. The body's preferred energy source for running is glycogen,

which is the body's way of storing carbs. It is recommended that during training, runners add

100 calories to their regular daily caloric intake for every mile run. In total, 65 percent of your daily

calories should come from carbohydrates. Your body's storage of this glycogen gets used up and begins to run out during running and will eventually run out if not restored. So you need to make sure the shop is well stocked so to

Most runners find it preferable to fuel up with carbs the night before rather than having a big breakfast which could cause digestive problems.

“Fibre can be problematic for some runners so try to get to know your digestion,” advises Medlin,

“and if this is a problem for you, consider reducing the amount of fibre in your diet for 24 hours before a race. Most people will benefit from some carbohydrate before a long run and a banana

or a porridge works well. Some people may find this gives them a stitch or compromises their performance, energy may be better in the form of diluted fruit juice, for example.

“Some people prefer to train fasted and may find that an espresso or a small dose of caffeine improves their performance. I have always run fasted from 5km runs to marathons. Make sure you’re getting plenty of vitamins and minerals, and consider a B vitamin supplement if you’re **reducing the amount of animal products in your diet.**”

When it comes to working out your nutritional needs, practice is perfect stresses Medlin.

“Monitor your performance and how enjoyable your runs are and reflect on what you’ve eaten

and had to drink in the 12 hours leading up to that run. The energy stored in your muscles plays a big role in how you feel and perform during a run and this is impacted by diet and rest days.”

And What About During A Run?

When you’re running especially long distances (a marathon takes around 4 to 5 hours to complete) you may also need to think about fueling during the run to keep yourself going.

From isotonic gels to trail mix, there’s a lot of different recommendations out there on what snacks to take. For Medlin though it’s all up to personal preference.

“Everyone is different and it’s important to try out a few snacks on training runs before you race so that you know what suits you best. It depends when and if you ate before the race and what

distance you're running. Most people won't need to refuel for 5-10km distances if you've done

some training unless it's particularly hot, you're pushing for a particular time or you're racing fasted. Distances usually require some liquid or glucose refuelling after 5-10km.

Sports gels are by the most popular choice, and are easiest to carry- but not everyone gets on with them. It is essential you try out on training runs, what suits you (jelly babies, banana, sports bars, dried fruit, sports drinks)

Will A Protein Shake After A Run Help Ease The Aches And Kickstart My Recovery?

After your run, you'll likely be experiencing the aches and pains that come with putting your body through the wringer for an extended period of time. Allowing your body to recover is important here, firstly in the form of rest (sleep and targeted rest days), and secondly in your protein intake.

The macronutrient is essential for muscle growth, strength, and repair, while not getting enough of it reduces lean body mass, muscle strength, and function. Based on [systemic reviews](#) of the research out there, 1.2 to 2.0g of protein, per kg of body weight, per day is our recommendation. This range depends on how active you are, and a protein shake in this case can be a useful (and portable) way of making sure you're getting enough. Again, there are many recovery drinks on the market, and although I use SIS Rego, some would argue these are not as useful as they make out. What is of importance, is that you eat some form of protein and carbs within 20 - 30mins after your long run, as that is the optimal time frame for recovery.

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