

Eight Nutrition Basics

Is nutrition too complicated? These 10 simple commandments are guaranteed to make you healthier, fitter and faster.

1. Plan your die

Devise a sensible eating plan that you can stick to, which will suit your lifestyle.

Don't set yourself unreasonable targets for food consumption. Unless you're seriously overweight, it's unlikely that your diet will need to undergo drastic restructuring.

Start by analysing what you are eating now. Sit down with a pen and paper and ask yourself some questions about your dietary habits. Do you have breakfast? Do you feel tired and hungry by the time you run in the evening? If your diet is repetitive and boring you may not be getting the variety of foods necessary for adequate nutrient intake.

2. Eat little and often

Frequent snacking throughout the day is a sure way to avoid low blood sugar levels and tiredness by the time you get home for your run. Research shows that eating little and often is best for runners... as long as you're eating the right things!

Make a point of taking high-carbohydrate snacks to work with you so that you aren't caught out. Avoid high-fat snacks such as crisps and chocolate, opting instead for high-carbohydrate and low-fat snacks, which make the best fuel. Dry breakfast cereal, plain popcorn, bagels, low-fat crispbreads, bananas and other fruit are all excellent choices.

3. Don't ignore the main meals

Regular sensible snacking is important, but proper meals are where carbo-loading really counts. Pasta is deservedly the runner's favourite, but there are plenty of other excellent high-carbohydrate foods, such as rice, baked potatoes, lentils, muesli and even baked beans. Still, beware! Some high-carbohydrate foods are also high in fat. Lasagne, thin-crust pizza, croissants and granola are some of the worst culprits.

4. Supplement those supplements

Instead of spending a small fortune on pills and potions to supplement your diet, try to ensure that you get the vitamins and minerals you need from the food you eat.

It's a big mistake to think that a supplement will completely satisfy your nutritional needs. Taking a pill might give you the recommended daily amount of a particular vitamin, but you also need protein, minerals, fibre and energy in the form of calories, which no pill will provide.

5. Drink more water

Water is the body's most important nutrient. It makes up between 50 and 60 per cent of your bodyweight and provides the medium in which most of the body processes occur. Aim to drink throughout the day, with a pint of water (or a sports drink) an hour before you run, and half a pint for every 30 minutes of running. On days when you run you should aim to consume five litres during the day, twice as much as is necessary on rest days.

6. Don't forget your pre-race meal

You're well-versed in the idea of carbo-loading, but there are still a few tricks of the trade that can help you to race at your best. Firstly, don't overeat late the night before as this will make sleep harder to come by. Secondly, don't think of that final plate of pasta on the eve of the race as your last meal. Your body will use up some of that food energy overnight, so make sure you have breakfast. European 5000 and 10,000m champion Sonia O'Sullivan chooses bread or cereal, coffee, perhaps a banana and lots of water, but the carbohydrate combination you opt for is up to you. Just cut right down on fat and protein, which take a long time to digest. Coffee is fine if it's part of your normal routine – just be sure to drink plenty of water along with it.

7. Learn to drink on the run

Lengthy races – 10Ks and longer – often have drinks stations to replace lost fluids, and if you are running a marathon they will help you to scale the dreaded 'wall'. Drinking on the run is an important element of technique and one you will need to practice prior to your race. Before you start the race, find out whether the drinks stations are providing water, or carbohydrate drinks as well. If you plan to use a carbo drink, be sure that you've tested it in practice runs. As you approach the station look right; most runners prefer to veer left to collect their drink, so the other side is often less crowded. Grab the cup with one hand and instantly cover the cup with the other if you plan to drink it as you run. Don't be afraid to stop and walk; a few seconds spent drinking properly will easily pay off in terms of performance.

8. Carbo-load for recovery

Immediately after a race or a hard run it's important to refuel your body with high-carbohydrate food or drink. The first four hours after strenuous exercise is a crucial time for taking on new glycogen to replace what you've lost while working hard. Aim to keep stocking up every 15 minutes or so rather than gorging on one meal, because this maintains higher blood glucose and insulin concentrations, which in turn makes greater absorption into the muscles possible. Recent research suggests that including around 25 per cent protein in your recovery food will optimise the recovery of your muscles.