

Mar 29, 2010

Training and Nutrition - Food to Fuel

Skipping pre- or post-workout meals are the most common mistakes people make when it comes to exercise, says registered dietitian Manuel Villacorta of San Francisco's MV Nutrition.

"When you exercise, you exhaust your tank, and it needs to be refueled again," Villacorta says. Otherwise, "it could lead to a cascade of problems, from breaking down muscles to feeling tired and light-headed, to feeling extremely hungry and then overeating."

It's ironic, isn't it? For all the fresh produce and innovative fare that we adore in the Bay Area, we sometimes overlook what food is at its core - fuel for the body.

Our brain and muscles need glucose to function, which means it needs carbohydrates, despite the intense beating that carbs have taken in many popular diet plans.

The average person who exercises for an hour a day - be it lifting weights, running, Spinning or cardio work - should fuel up with anywhere from 15 to 30 grams of carbs and 6 to 14 grams of protein in the hour before working out, Villacorta says.

A banana and a glass of milk fit the bill, as does oatmeal and a few hard-boiled eggs.

He recommends similar amounts for refueling afterward, with a little extra protein to help repair muscles.

Here, timing is critical. Post-workout meals should be eaten within 30 minutes of exercise. The longer you wait, the more your body starts cannibalizing itself in search of fuel.

Again, it doesn't take much. A slice of whole-grain toast and a few slices of lean deli meat will do. So will a cup of cottage cheese and an apple. If you can go right into a full breakfast or dinner, all the better.

Tastes can change

The key is finding out what works for your system. Every person handles food differently, and tastes can change over the years.

When I was training for my first marathon, I was also The Chronicle's beat reporter for the Golden State Warriors.

Keeping on a regular workout schedule while traveling around the country was tough enough. Having to wake up an hour earlier wherever I was, just to eat and wait for food to digest before starting on an hour long run, was borderline brutal.

Then I rediscovered bananas. In addition to being portable, cheap and abundantly available, they're digestive goddesses. I'm fine eating a banana just before a run, or even on one. (Endurance athletes, or those exercising for more than 90 minutes, need fuel during workouts as well).

Dates are also ascending to savior status. High in carbs and natural sugar, they're also the perfect sweetener for homemade muesli - tops on my breakfast list.

The rest of my routine is a work in progress. But in running the gamut from not eating at all to eating too much, I've hit on a few staples.

Cottage cheese and greek yogurt are my go-to sources for protein. If I'm heading to the gym or a trailhead, I'll usually throw a small tub and some fruit in my bag so I can start refueling on the drive back.

The smoothie option

Some other things I've learned over the years: After hard workouts, I'm usually not in the mood to eat solid food. It's much easier to drink something, which is where smoothies come in.

I bought a Vita-Mix a while back, and the high-powered blender is now my favorite kitchen gadget. I can throw anything in there - apples, oranges, dates, spinach, kale, you name it - and come away with a smooth elixir.

It's also great for making your own sports drink. While Villacorta says that water is adequate for hour-long workouts, I often crave something with a salty, even sour, edge. I'll blend dates and lemon or lime juice with water and add in some salt as an electrolyte replacement.

And speaking of drinks, personal trainer Robbi Shveyd of San Francisco adds that proper fueling isn't limited to just food. Dehydration is a common obstacle she faces with her clients when it comes to getting the most from their workouts and recovery.

"By and large, we can tell if they haven't eaten, and we can tell what the night before was like," Shveyd says. "They've either had alcohol or caffeine, and they come in so depleted."

The bottom line? Drink plenty of fluid. And even if you're trying to lose weight, don't try to cut calories - especially carbs - around exercise times.

"You can train your body to do anything," Villacorta says. "But that doesn't mean you won't feel better if you do it the right way."

Mix & match

These easy food pairs provide good amounts of nutrients for pre- and post-workout eating.

1 banana + 1 or 2 Laughing Cow Mini Babybel cheeses

1 apple + 1 cup yogurt

2 hard-boiled egg whites + 1 cup milk

1 cup prepared oatmeal + 1 cup orange juice

1 slice whole-grain toast + 2 ounces of lean meat

1/2 cup low-fat cottage cheese + 1 apple

Strawberry & Banana Smoothie

Serves 2

Feel free to use frozen fruit, though it will make the smoothie thicker. To boost the sweetness, add more dates.

- 6 strawberries
- 1 cup nonfat Greek-style yogurt
- 1 cup nonfat milk
- 2 dates, pitted
- 1 banana
- 1 tablespoon flaxseed meal

Instructions: Combine all ingredients in a blender and blend on high until desired consistency is reached. Divide between two glasses.

Per serving: 237 calories, 18 g protein, 39 g carbohydrate, 3 g fat (0 g saturated), 0 mg cholesterol, 110 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.

Cherry Chocolate Energy Bars

Makes 12 bars

These are quick and easy to make and don't have the strange aftertastes that commercial bars tend to have. It can be a bit of a mess because of the sticky syrup, but soaking the dishes and utensils in warm water will make cleaning up a breeze. Much of the fat comes from the nuts, which means it is monounsaturated.

- 1 1/2 cups crisped brown rice cereal or Rice Krispies
- 1 cup quick-cooking oats

- 3/4 cup dried cherries
- 1/4 cup semisweet chocolate chips
- 1/4 cup flaxseed meal
- 1/3 cup unflavored whey protein (available at natural food stores)
- 1 cup brown rice syrup
- 1/4 cup maple syrup
- 1/2 cup almond butter (or other nut butter)

Instructions: Mix the crisped brown rice, oats, cherries, chocolate chips, flaxseed and whey protein in a large bowl; set aside. In a small saucepan, bring the brown rice syrup to a boil over medium-high heat. Take off stove, add the maple syrup and almond butter, and stir until smooth. Pour over the dry ingredients and stir to combine.

Line a small pan with plastic wrap (an 8- by 8-inch pan is fine. The mixture won't completely cover the bottom, but that's OK). Press the mixture into the pan to the desired thickness. The mixture will hold its shape while warm, but will become firmer as it cools. Cool completely before cutting into bars.

Per bar: 180 calories, 6 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 9 g fat (1 g saturated), 0 mg cholesterol, 32 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

E-mail Janny Hu at jhu@sfchronicle.com.