

Training Table in Your Backpack

Have you ever had a day when you skipped lunch, and then felt weak and lightheaded at practice or training? Have you even run low on energy during a swim meet or other games because there was nothing around that you wanted to eat? While traveling to a competition, have you eaten food that you usually don't eat and ended up with a stomachache?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions, you already know that leaving nutrition to chance can hurt your performance. Carrying food with you is one solution to these and other common nutrition problems.

World-class athletes have long known that a backpack, gym bag or locker can make a great training table.

1. What to Pack

Basically, the food has got to be sturdy, ready to eat, and not need refrigeration. We're not talking gourmet meals, but with some planning you can get the energy you need to perform your best.

2. Carbohydrate to Go

Carbohydrates provide fuel for your muscles to work long and hard. High carbohydrate foods and beverages, like breads, muffins, crackers, rolls, bagels, granola bars, pretzels, cereal, juice and so forth are a cinch to pack, and available from most convenience shops. Most athletes don't have a problem getting enough of these foods.

But other carbohydrates, like fruits and vegetables, are sometimes more difficult to get unless you pack them. Fruits and vegetables are full of the vitamins and minerals that help your body recover from training, and help keep you from getting sick. Pack pieces (apples, pears, bananas, oranges, peaches), sealed containers (applesauce, fruit cocktail, peaches, pears, mandarin oranges, pineapple) or bags (grapes, carrots, celery) of fruits and vegetables in your backpack, bag or locker.

That was easy. The biggest stumbling block for most athletes is what *else* to pack. After all, athletes cannot live on carbohydrates alone.

3. Packable Protein

Make sure your portable training table contains food rich in protein. Protein helps repair and build your muscles to help you increase your strength when you train hard. Here are some protein-rich foods to pack.

- Peanut butter, on bread or as a dip for carrots or celery
- Canned tuna, chicken
- Beef jerky
- Sealed cheese sticks or cheese slices

- Peanuts, walnuts, almonds, cashews, and other nuts
- High protein sport bars

If you have a tote with an ice pack or access to a refrigerator, you can pack deli meats, yogurt, cottage cheese, hard-boiled eggs, and other refrigerated protein-rich foods. You can get sick from eating meat, dairy products and eggs that have been at room temperature for more than about two hours. It's not uncommon to eat spoiled food because it doesn't always have a bad taste or smell. Many a great athlete has had a performance ruined because of food poisoning. This can be avoided by keeping your cold foods cold.

4. Beverages on The Move

Don't overlook the obvious. Drinking a variety of beverages over the day helps keep you hydrated. Bottled water, sport drinks, juices and soft drinks are easy to carry, but milk can be more difficult to keep close at hand. If you have a tote with an ice pack, round out your beverage choices with white or chocolate milk.

5. What About Days Of Competition

On competition days, the nutrition goals are to eat enough to feel comfortable, and most importantly, to get enough fluid so that you are hydrated. Pack foods that you usually eat, that agree with you, and that you like. Your eating during a day of competition should be routine and predictable, and carrying food with you makes that a no-brainer.

One very important thing about carrying food with you is that you are in control of what and when you eat. For example, during games, long matches, or competitions, many athletes don't like to eat large precompetition meals, but instead like to graze, eating every few hours. One way to pack for this is to put your day's worth of food in individual bags and eat one item every hour or two between sets, games, innings, periods, quarters and so forth. For example, you might pack a handful of grapes in one bag. In another bag you might put a cup of cereal; in another, 4 graham crackers; in another, ½ peanut butter sandwich, and so forth.

6. How Much

A common mistake is not packing enough food. If your day is full from dawn til dusk (or later) and you need to carry food for the whole day, forget the little brown bag. In fact, you may need to dedicate an entire backpack or gym bag to food and drinks to make sure you get enough.

7. Take Charge of Your Eating

When you meet your opponent, you want the advantage. Part of that advantage lies in not leaving your nutrition to chance. Turning your backpack, gym bag or locker into a training table puts you in control.