

What to Eat for a Swim Meet

By Jeannie Gazzaniga-Moloo PhD, RD

Swimmers take your mark ... go! Good nutrition can't replace excellent coaching, effort, talent, and personal drive. But there's no question that what your child eats and drinks can make a difference in their reaching peak performance during the swim season.

The research is very compelling that eating well on days of practice is just as important as eating well right before a swim meet. A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds will help your child train harder so that he or she is better prepared for competition.

Carbohydrates are Body's Main Fuel

For sports and everyday living, carbohydrates are your body's foremost energy source - and main fuel for working muscles. Training and a healthy carbohydrate-rich diet work together to boost the competitive edge. Training helps your body use carbohydrates efficiently and store more as muscle glycogen. Stored in muscles, glycogen fuel is ready to power your child's swimming.

Are carbohydrates created equal? No! Carbohydrates in foods are either made of complex or simple sugars. Complex carbohydrates, also referred to as starches, are found in whole grain cereal, bread, rice, pasta, vegetables, and beans. The simple sugar category is broader and includes: lactose - found in dairy foods; glucose and fructose - found in fruits and fruit juices; and sucrose, also known as table sugar, found in cookies, cakes, candy, and sweetened beverages. Both complex and simple sugars supply energy, but simple sugars are digested and absorbed into the bloodstream faster and complex carbohydrates must first be broken down.

So what is a healthy diet to boost the competitive swimming edge? For starters, what your child eats right before the meet can certainly help, but more importantly a healthy carbohydrate-rich diet for several days prior to the meet makes the real difference. We aren't talking carbohydrate loading nor are we talking refined-carbohydrate, high-fat foods such as candy bars, cookies, french fries, and junk cereal. We are talking a diet rich in fruits,

vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, lowfat or nonfat dairy, and lean choices of protein. These are the foods that are going to provide the nourishment a competitive swimmer needs.

What to Eat before the Meet

Eating a hearty high-carbohydrate dinner the night before is important. Pre-meet dinner ideas include: your child's favorite pasta dish (preferably with whole wheat pasta), whole grain roll, and their favorite vegetable with fruit and angel food cake for dessert. Another possibility is chili made with beans and some lean meat, corn bread, and their favorite vegetable topped off with a serving of fresh berries and ice cream. Whatever the dinner menu, just make sure it is loaded with complex carbohydrates and some lean protein.

In the morning getting kids to eat before a swim can be tough. But eating breakfast before an early morning swim meet is especially important because it replenishes glycogen in the liver (which later can be used for fuel when needed during a race) that may have been used by the body while sleeping. If at all possible, it's important not to skip breakfast.

Following are some ideas of light, high-carbohydrate breakfast meals or snacks. Many of the foods can be put in baggies for eating on the way to the swim meet or shortly after arrival if your child's appetite for breakfast hasn't quite kicked in.

- hot or cold whole grain cereal with fruit and milk
- pancakes with syrup, fat-free yogurt, and strawberries
- toasted whole wheat waffle topped with fruit and yogurt
- smoothie made with yogurt, lowfat or nonfat milk, or soy and fruit or 100% fruit juice
- whole grain toast with peanut butter and jam, 1% chocolate milk
- whole grain bagel with light cream cheese and jam, fruit and juice
- whole grain crackers, cheese stick, banana, and fruit juice
- bran muffin, yogurt, and berries
- leftover cheese pizza slice and orange juice

During Competition

For starters, keeping kids hydrated is key, especially during those hot summer days. Water is best, but sometimes a slightly sweetened beverage such as a sport drink or slightly diluted 100% fruit juice. These drinks will help maintain your child's blood sugar levels, boost stamina, and help replenish their muscle glycogen. Remember, drinks rich in simple carbohydrates such as sodas and other sweetened beverages can actually cause mild dehydration because water is pulled into the stomach to help dilute the sugar concentration of the sugared beverage. So, whenever possible, avoid highly sweetened drinks during the actual meet and before practice.

During the meet healthy high-carbohydrate, low-fat snacks are key for replenishing the body's fuel source. Remember, high-fat snacks including cookies, candy bars, and potato chips take longer to digest and can actually slow your child down on race day. Healthier snacks for competition day are low in fat and high in carbohydrates such as fresh fruit sliced, wedged, or whole, whole grain crackers, pretzels, bagels, rice cakes, fruit bars, smoothies, and nonfat yogurt.

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