**THE BEST CARBS TO INCLUDE IN THE TRAINING DIET**

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**BY JILL CASTLE//MS,RDN**

Carbohydrate-based foods are a swimmer’s best buddy when it comes to fueling for competition. Carbohydrate-containing foods can offer a quick burst of energy, or they can load up the muscle with a lasting source of fuel. A swimmer’s training diet should contain two types of carbs: simple carbs to provide a fast source of carbohydrate (think sports drink or dried fruit) and complex carbohydrate foods to offer sustained fuel (pretzels, bread, potato).

Carb loading is the idea that eating a high carbohydrate diet prior to competition prepares the muscles with a ready source of glycogen (carbohydrate that is stored in the muscle) so the swimmer will avoid early muscle fatigue, low energy, and experience superb performance in the water. Although a popular concept, carbohydrate loading is not proven to be effective in young swimmers.

For one, carbohydrate loading is an approach based on what we know about the adult metabolism of carbohydrate. The reality is there is little scientific evidence supporting the benefit of this practice in the younger athlete (pre-pubertal or pubertal children and teens). Additionally, young swimmers don’t store carbohydrate in their muscles as well as adults. Females, because they have less muscle mass than males, store less. It’s not until teens reach adulthood that they may see the benefits of carb loading.

Instead, researchers advise a daily high carbohydrate diet for young athletes so they have a readily available fuel source for their working muscles.

The healthiest and best way to get optimal amounts of carbohydrate is to eat a diet that is loaded with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low fat dairy products. Some of the best carbohydrate-based foods the swimmer can incorporate into daily meals and snacks are starchy carbs.

Despite the media spin that carbs are “bad,” starchy carbs are a good fuel source for the swimmer. Here are some starchy carbs to incorporate in meals and snacks, along with some of their nutritional benefits:

**Sweet potato:** A baked sweet potato is full of fiber and vitamin A. Nix the brown sugar to keep it a healthy option.

**Potatoes:** Potatoes are high in fiber, potassium and vitamin C. Eat them baked, not fried, most of the time.

**Rice:** Rice is low in fat, and if you chose brown or wild rice, you’ll get a kick of fiber as well.

**Quinoa:** Quinoa offers a good source of fiber, potassium, healthy fats, protein and magnesium. Cook it like you would cook rice.

**Pasta:** A classic pre-competition meal inclusion, pasta is a favorite among youth athletes. Bump up the fiber by opting for whole wheat versions.

**Corn:** It may surprise you to know that corn contains protein and iron. It’s also a good source of vitamin B6 and magnesium.

**Peas:** Peas enhance the diet with potassium, fiber, protein and vitamin C.

**Beans and lentils:** Beans and lentils are a nutritional powerhouse. They are low in fat, high in protein, fiber, potassium and iron.

There are many more carbohydrate-rich foods swimmer’s can include in their training diet. Use whole grain breads, cornbread (made with cornmeal), shredded wheat cereal, cornflakes, pretzels, bagels, English muffins, and oatmeal.

Be thoughtful and think ahead for upcoming meets, especially when traveling. Make smart food choices at restaurants, hotel breakfast buffets. Avoid greasy and fried foods, and anything new you haven’t raced on before.

**The night before, or 3-4 hr pre-race window:**

--Spaghetti with meat (lean ground turkey or beef) sauce

--Grilled chicken, baked potato and green vegetable

--Grilled fish, rice, salad

--Whole wheat pancakes w/ fruit

--32 oz water

**1.5-2 hr race window:**

Whole grain cereal with milk

 Bagel with peanut butter

Turkey sandwich with cheese, tomato, avocado on multi-grain bread

PBJ n spaghettios

Oatmeal with nuts and fruit

Baked potato and cottage cheese

Vegetable soup

Yogurt with nuts

Can of tuna/cottage cheese/saltines

**15 min before race, think hydration and “quick carbs:”**

a few oz water and or sports drink

small piece of fruit

**In-between races, from 15 minutes to 2 hours:**

--Water/sports drink

--combined carb/protein bar (keep sugar to less than 6g)

--trail mix

--chocolate milk

**Avoid:** anything overly processed; snacky foods with too much sugar or salt. Protein or carb bars masquerading with too much sugar (8g +); fruit juices high in acid.