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SHOULD SWIMMERS EAT BEFORE EARLY MORNING PRACTICE?

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BY JILL CASTLE, MS, RDN

When early morning swim practices begin, young swimmers can get behind on eating.

Take Henry, for example.

He was afraid to eat before morning practice, fearful of cramps or getting sick. So he didn't eat anything, and ate a protein bar after practice on his way to school. By the time he returned home, he was exhausted, beyond hungry and playing catch-up, eating nearly everything in sight.



Many young swimmers make the mistake of skipping out on the early morning pre-workout meal. But what they don't realize is that these first foods set the day's eating cycle in motion. There are three main reasons to eat before early morning practice:

- Prevents symptoms of low blood sugar, such as light-headedness, blurry vision and fatigue.
- Settles the stomach, absorbing the gastric juices associated with an empty stomach, and reduces hunger.
- Offers up fuel for the muscles and brain.

Another benefit is it helps with appetite management throughout the day. Front-loading (eating early in the day) helps all individuals, whether athletic or not, manage their hunger and avoid "back loading" (eating large amounts late in the day). When swimmers complain of hunger and overeat at night, check on what is happening early in their day with nutrition. If meals are skipped or too light in calories, this may be the problem—and it's easy to fix!

What to eat depends on individual tolerance, as some swimmers do well with a liquid breakfast, while others can handle solid food. The goal, however, is to get something nutritious in the stomach.

When choosing what to eat, swimmers should target foods that are high in carbohydrate (read carbohydrate article [here](#)), moderate in protein, and low in fat. Avoid nutrient-poor foods like candy, donuts, soda and other sugary breakfast items. Keep the portion small to prevent getting too full which can cause cramping, and eat thirty to sixty minutes prior to jumping in the pool.

For those who aren't sure about what to eat, experiment with both liquid and solid foods. If eating an early morning pre-exercise snack isn't working, swimmers can always try to eat well the day before and plan a nutritious pre-bedtime snack, which will carry over to the morning, contributing some energy availability for the workout.

Remember, the most important food rule to follow is this: choose foods that work for you! Solid foods or liquids work well. It simply depends on food preferences and tolerance. Below are some ideas to consider:

Solid foods

- Banana, with or without a small swipe of peanut butter
- Small package of trail mix
- 4-6 ounces of fruited yogurt, or plain with added fruit
- Granola bar
- Fig Newtons
- Toasted waffle
- ¾ cup of cereal, with or without 1/3 to ½ cup of low fat milk
- Whole wheat toast with jam
- Friend bars (recipe below)

Liquids

- Plain low fat or skim milk, or soymilk
- Homemade fruit smoothie (1 cup frozen fruit, ½ cup yogurt, 4-6 ounces 100% juice)
- Ovaltine or Carnation Instant Breakfast mixed with skim milk
- Homemade dairy-based smoothie (1 cup low fat milk (or non-dairy substitute), 1 small banana, 3 strawberries, dollop of yogurt, and ice)

Friend Bars (similar to KIND bars)

With permission from: *Power Hungry: The Ultimate Energy Bar Cookbook* by Camilla Saulsbury

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ cups chopped assorted raw or toasted nuts and/or seeds (e.g., cashews, sunflower seeds, green pumpkin seeds, peanuts, pecans)
- 1/3 cup crisp brown rice cereal
- ½ cup chopped dried fruit (e.g., raisins, apricots, dates, berries)
- 1/3 cup organic light corn syrup or brown rice syrup (can also substitute DIY Glucose Syrup—recipe in the book)
- 1/8 teaspoon fine sea salt (optional)

Directions:

1. Line an 8-inch square baking pan with foil or parchment paper and spray with non-stick cooking spray.
2. Preheat oven to 325 F.
3. Stir together the nuts or seeds, cereal, and dried fruit in a large bowl.
4. Add the syrup and salt (if using) to the nut mixture and stir until evenly coated.
5. Transfer the mixture to the prepared pan. Place a large piece of parchment paper, wax paper, or plastic wrap (coated with nonstick cooking spray) atop the bar mixture and use it to spread, flatten, and very firmly compact the mixture evenly in the pan. Discard the paper or plastic.
6. Bake in the preheated oven for 17 to 20 minutes or until slightly browned at the edges, but still somewhat soft in the center.
7. Using the liner, lift the mixture from the pan and transfer to a cutting board. Cut into 10 bars. Cool completely.

Nutrients per bar: Calories 150, Fat 8.6 g, Carbs 17.6 g, Protein 3.8 g

Jill Castle, MS, RDN is a childhood nutrition expert and co-author of [Fearless Feeding: How to Raise Healthy Eaters from High Chair to High School](#). She is the creator of [Just The Right Byte](#), a childhood nutrition blog. She lives with her husband and four children in New Canaan, CT. Questions? Contact her at Jill@JillCastle.com.

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