

SWIM MEET NUTRITION

The human body is more complex than any computer ever built. To perform at optimum levels, it requires the right foods, in the right amounts, consumed at the right times. Therefore, swimmers must educate themselves on basic sports nutrition.

What Food Groups Work Best

A pre-race meal should provide the muscles with enough fuel to perform at peak levels. Foods high in carbohydrates, low in fats, moderate in protein, and low-to-moderate in fiber work the best. Swimmers should avoid spicy or gas producing choices on race day.

Carbohydrates Matter

Of all the foods groups consumed in a pre-race meal, carbohydrates are the single most important because the body breaks them down into simple sugars or glucose. From here, the pancreas secretes a hormone called insulin to help transport the glucose to the working muscles. The average pre-race meal should consist of at least 80 percent carbohydrates. Foods high in carbohydrates include:

- Meal replacement shakes
- Low-sugar whole grain cereals
- Oatmeal with low-fat milk
- Whole wheat pasta
- Sweet potatoes
- High-carb energy bars
- Whole wheat pancakes
- Real fruit smoothies with low-fat yogurt
- Wild rice
- Bananas
- Natural fruit juices
- Peanut butter and jelly sandwich on whole wheat bread
- Hummus (chickpeas)
- Low-fat yogurt with granola and fruit
- Multi-grain bagel with peanut butter

Timing the Pre-Race Meal

The primary purpose of a pre-race meal is to increase the amount of glycogen in the body. Glycogen stores drop approximately 50 percent during sleep, so swimmers must replenish their glycogen stores upon waking up in the morning. Ideally, they should eat four hours before the start of competition which gives the body plenty of time to convert carbohydrates into glucose and clears the intestines. Realistically, most swimmers can not eat four hours ahead so aiming for at least two hours is a good compromise.

Some swimmers find it difficult to consume enough food first thing in the morning so eating a high carbohydrate dinner the night before is a must. Whole wheat pasta with chicken or a whole wheat pizza with low-fat cheese and veggies are two great options.

Eating After the Race

While eating a healthy breakfast is a great start to the day, swimmers must also replenish their glycogen stores throughout the day by eating additional amounts of carbohydrates.

Consuming small amounts of protein is also recommended – remember, 80% carbs with a little protein added will do the trick. If an athlete has a short time between races, stick to carbs only.

Foods high in protein include:

- Chicken
- Boiled eggs
- Low-fat turkey, chicken, or beef
- Low-sodium canned tuna
- Soy
- Pumpkin seeds
- Low-fat cottage cheese, yogurt, or chocolate milk
- Nut butters
- Hummus with whole wheat pita bread

** Swimmers should avoid high-fat protein choices like pepperoni, bacon, and whole-milk cheese.*

Hydration

Staying well hydrated during competition is critical, yet most swimmers struggle with water consumption. I think of water as a miracle drug helping to regulate body temperature, blood pressure, and transporting essential macronutrients like carbohydrates, proteins, and fats throughout the body. To stay ahead of the game, swimmers should consume at least 16-20 ounces of water upon waking up and 8-10 ounces of water every 20 minutes throughout the day, Sports drinks are another great option, but a proper real food diet combined with plenty of water will suffice. Swimmers should refrain from drinking carbonated or caffeinated beverages during competition.