Eating Before Exercise

Athlete Scenario

The day of a football game, I often feel nervous and sometimes skip lunch, only to feel hungry later. Games are usually in the afternoon so I know I need to eat something beforehand. Playing both offense and defense, I rarely get a break. What foods can I eat and at what times to supply me with enough energy to perform well the entire game?

Goals of Nutrition Before Exercise

- Consume a carbohydrate-rich snack or meal before exercise to top off muscle stores. With pre-competition jitters, liquid meal replacements may be a better choice than whole foods.
- Include small amounts of protein in your pre-exercise meal(s). Protein helps build and repair muscle tissue. Adequate protein before exercise may help reduce post-exercise muscle soreness.
- Choose pre-exercise meal(s) that are low in fat and fiber to ensure optimal digestion.

Pre-exercise Foods & Fluids

3–4 Hours Before Exercise

- Peanut butter & honey on toast + instant breakfast drink
- Fruit and yogurt smoothie + low-fat granola
- Oatmeal with brown sugar and almonds + skim milk + banana
- Low-fat cottage cheese + apple butter + crackers + fresh grapes
- Lean hamburger on bun with lettuce & tomato + side salad + yogurt-fruit parfait
- Turkey and Swiss sandwich + fruit + sports drink
- Low-fat tuna melt sandwich + fruit cup + fat-free yogurt

30–60 Minutes Before Exercise

- Sports drink or water
- Sports gel, sport beans or gummies, sports bar
- Piece of fruit or jam sandwich

Tips to Take With You

1. Experiment with foods and drinks in practice and lower level competitions to determine the best timing and your tolerance for pre-exercise foods.

2. Practice! Figuring out what works best for you will boost confidence in eating before exercise.

3. Fuel muscles early with easily digestible carbohydrate-rich foods and beverages for training or competition later in the day.

Contact SCAN

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Written by SCAN registered dietitians (RDs). The key to optimal meal planning for athletes is individualization. For personalized nutrition plans contact a SCAN sports dietitian or Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD) by accessing “Find a SCAN Dietitian” at www.scandpg.org | 800.249.2875.

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