

Foods to Fuel Your Workout

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Energize your exercise routine by choosing the right preworkout foods. Whether you're an early-bird exerciser, a midday mover, or a night owl, here's how to fuel your engine.

Whether you're heading out for a morning jog or going to a midday spin class, knowing what to eat before your workout can make or break your exercise routine. Preworkout foods should be high enough in calories to sustain the intensity of your workout, but the meal shouldn't be large enough to slow you down, says **Franci Cohen**, a personal trainer, certified nutritionist, and exercise physiologist in Brooklyn, New York. "Fuel your body; don't drag it down," she advises.

According to Cohen, the perfect meal before exercise should be low in fat, moderate in easily digested carbohydrates and protein, and low in fiber, and it should contain some water. Here's why this combination works: Carbs are stored in the liver and muscle for energy use, and protein (amino acids) is the building material of muscles and is needed to keep your red blood cells healthy. Those cells carry oxygen to your working muscles, Cohen explains. Water is essential to replenish the electrolytes and fluids lost when you sweat during exercise.

Of course, the best thing for you to eat (and the best time to eat it) also depends on the intensity of your workout. Marathon runners often have a big pasta meal the night before a race. The reason is simple, says Cohen. Carbs are broken down and stored as glycogen in muscles and the liver, but this process takes time — digesting a big meal can take from three to five hours. "While we sleep, the body undergoes this digestion," Cohen says. "By the time we wake up, the storage is complete — we're all set and fully fueled for the big race!"

But you don't have to run marathons to be mindful of what you eat and when you choose to exercise.

Foods for Morning Workouts

If you're up at first light and like to run with the roosters, should you eat something beforehand or head out on an empty stomach? "There's conflicting data on the subject," says Cohen. "One school of thought maintains that 'fasting aerobics' (exercising at 75 to 80 percent of your maximum heart rate without eating) is best. It's thought that your body will burn stored fat because it can't burn your breakfast."

In fact, a small study published in the *British Journal of Nutrition* found that exercise before breakfast gives you an advantage. Ten overweight, sedentary men took part, and each underwent three trials: eating breakfast and not exercising, walking briskly for an hour before breakfast, and doing the same workout after breakfast. The researchers found that exercising before eating resulted in a larger fat loss and lower levels of fat in the blood than after-breakfast exercise. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that before or after meals, exercising was better than skipping workouts altogether.

The opposing school of thought maintains that if you eat first, your body will have more energy, so you'll be able to work harder and thereby get a bigger payoff from your workout. "Both schools of thought have been substantiated through well-designed clinical trials, so the bottom line is, It's totally up to you," Cohen says. If you choose to eat beforehand, think of it more as a [snack](#) than a meal. Cohen suggests a handful of whole grain cereal, a glass of skim milk, and a few raw almonds — just enough to get you fueled and on your way.

If you do opt to eat, keep the timing in mind as well. Generally, feeding your body a combination of carbs and protein one to three hours before exercise is ideal, according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. "If you plan on grabbing a light breakfast and rushing off to the gym, your body will not have sufficient time to digest your food before exercising," says Cohen. This can lead to cramping and other intestinal distress. If you're tight on time, Cohen advises that you stick with simple carbs, which are broken down easily (in the small intestine), instead of proteins and fats, which take longer to break down and are digested in the stomach.

Foods for Midday Movers

If you're motivated to exercise in the middle of the day, Cohen says you need a super lunch to get you through your workout and to prevent a three o'clock slump. That's when blood sugar dips and you find yourself struggling to make it to five. "You want a lunch that will keep you happy, energized, and smiling straight through until dinnertime," she says. She suggests an oldie but goodie: ants on a log. Spread some almond butter or low-fat peanut butter into a few celery sticks. Top with a row of raisins. Throw a hard-boiled egg onto the plate, says Cohen, and you've got a combination that "provides slow-release energy, enabling you to power through your workout from start to finish."

Foods for Evening Exercise

"If you've made it through the day and still have the energy to work out, then hats off to you," says Cohen. In the evening, your circadian rhythm is already preparing the body for sleep. Sleep hormones are kicking in, and energizing hormones are being suppressed, so you'll need a boost to jump-start a workout. "My top pick is green apples," says Cohen. They provide a modest amount of sugar and valuable pectin fiber, which slows the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream. That means you'll avoid blood sugar peaks and crashes. "Add a few almonds or a glass of skim milk," Cohen suggests, "for more protein."

Postworkout Foods

Whether you work out in the morning, at noon, or at night, tired muscles need to be refueled afterward. A combination of carbs and protein eaten within about 20 minutes of exercise will do the job best. Reach for these satisfying suggestions from Cohen to fuel your body and prepare it for your next workout:

- Greek yogurt with natural granola and fresh strawberries
- Whole-grain cereal with skim or low-fat milk
- Fresh turkey breast on a multigrain rice cake with some leafy greens and tomato

- A smoothie made with almond milk or skim milk and lots of fresh fruit
- An egg-white omelet with spinach and mushrooms and a slice of whole-grain toast on the side

Choosing smart workout foods will leave you feeling energized rather than running on empty, both during and after your fitness sessions.