

Outpost Exchange
Eating for Optimal Workout
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Carbo-loading. Creatine. Protein snacks. Sports drinks. Energy bars. What's the right fuel for fitness? Area sports, health and nutrition experts offer their advice on how to eat right for exercising.

For starters, don't skip meals when heading to the gym. "A lot of people get off work at 5:30 p.m., haven't eaten since noon and think, 'I'll just get in an exercise before going home for dinner,'" said certified fitness trainer Becky Coady, MA, ACSM-HFI, of Milwaukee's Training Wheels, Inc. "You don't want to go into a workout hypoglycemic," she states. Hypoglycemia is defined as a deficiency of sugar in the blood. In this case, it results from going too long without eating. Breakfast is another meal commonly missed in the name of saving time.

Instead of skipping, Coady recommends snacking on complex carbohydrates. "Chose something that is easy to eat, easy to digest and is a quick energy source, such as a piece of fruit, a half of a bagel, or a power bar," she says. A complex carbohydrate snack slowly elevates your blood sugar, giving you the energy you need to put in a good work out. "Because you didn't go into the work out with low blood sugar, you get more bang for your exercise buck...and come out with more energy, too," she states. Getting energy from food for a workout is so important, Coady suggests that you may be better off not exercising at all if you haven't eaten in several hours. "Exercising when you're hypoglycemic is not healthy. It can cause metabolism problems, headaches and nausea," she says. "When the body gets low blood sugar, it doesn't know when it is going to get food again, so it goes into a resting metabolism. It's all about the metabolism."

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Don't let the "sugar" part of "low blood sugar" seduce you into thinking you need more sweet stuff prior to your workout, however. Not all carbohydrates are created equal. Those that are mostly sugar or concentrated starches, such as cookies, fruit juice, box cereal and even rice cakes and bananas, enter the blood stream very quickly, spiking insulin levels and giving an initial energy buzz. But shortly thereafter, blood sugar dips back down, causing one to slump. This is another form of hypoglycemia. "The habit is to go for the dense carbohydrate forms that raise sugars very quickly, versus whole foods," according to independent nutritionist Larry Johansen, M.S., of Proactive HealthCare Solutions, who does nutritional, attunement and stress management consulting, coaching and classes. Johansen specializes in The Zone, a diet based on the book by Barry Sears that focuses on using food as a drug to regulate and balance insulin and glucagon release in the body.

Even most sports drinks, purported by their marketers to be healthy, are exercise no-no's because of their sugar levels. "A high carbo drink like Gatorade will actually over-stimulate insulin and be counterproductive to your work out," Johansen says. All the experts agree that you're better off sticking with water. The American College of Sports Medicine suggests drinking eight ounces prior to exercising, and then drinking four-six ounces more every 15 minutes during an aerobic workout.

Although protein is critical for building muscle, it is not a good idea to fill up on protein-rich foods prior to exercising. "Eating fats and proteins before a work out is hard on the digestion," says Coady. "The body is always going to favor digestion over making muscle, so if you've eaten something that's hard to digest it will take blood and oxygen away from muscles for digestion," leading to cramps. Certified athletic trainer Sandy O'Brien, who has a B.S. in exercise fitness does suggest, however, that eating protein after a workout, especially after an anaerobic session such as weight lifting, can be helpful to repair the muscles and ease muscle soreness.

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Sports supplements such as creatine and DHEA have become popular with some athletes, but Dr. Gary Lewis, M.D., who is an integrative family practice physician with a focus on sports medicine among other things, does not advise them. “In their prescribed doses they may be OK, but I don’t think they give all the benefits the manufacturers claim,” he said. Instead, he recommends simple antioxidants such as vitamin E (400 iu a day) and vitamin C (2000 mg a day) for the regular exerciser. “Exercise is breaking down tissue. Vitamins C and E help rejuvenate tissue,” he said. He also suggests a general multi-vitamin. If you’re a woman of child-bearing age, it should include iron.

Although what you eat (or don’t) just prior to exercising is important, Dr. Lewis and others point out that what really counts is how you eat overall. “If you’re exercising and putting in all that hard work, then go and eat bad food, you’ve just undone it all,” Lewis said. Larry Johansen agrees. “If you’re exercising, but don’t pay attention to proper eating, you’re really fooling yourself,” he said. Johansen boils down a healthy diet to this:

- Eat three meals a day, each with a portion of animal- or soy-derived protein the size of the palm of your hand and preferably low-fat, such as fish, chicken breast or 2-4% cottage cheese.
- After putting the protein on the plate, fill it with veggies and fruit (high fiber carbohydrates)
- Include a few nuts, olive oil or avocado.
- Add a mid-afternoon and bedtime snack that is protein and carbohydrate balanced, such as an apple (carb) with a piece of string cheese (protein). A glass of unflavored soy milk prior to bedtime is a good option.
- Add a leafy side salad to any meal. “It’s a freebie,” Johansen said.

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Food and Exercise—Add Three

- Back off on high glycemic carbohydrates--those that enter the blood stream quickly and lead to hypoglycemia--such as pasta, potatoes, fruit juices, soda and large quantities of beans and grains. “I’m not saying don’t do pasta,” he states, “just treat it as a condiment, not the main dish.”
- Don’t skip meals. “Skipping meals is the fastest way to gain weight,” he said.

Johansen believes that in the health equation, it’s 80% diet and only 20% exercise. “If a person doesn’t have a balanced, basic diet, everything else they do with their health care, including exercise, is an uphill battle,” he stated. There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between exercise and a healthier lifestyle, however. “The more you exercise, the more you naturally change your eating habits. Your body talks to you and you start to make healthier choices,” said athletic trainer Sandy O’Brien.

“Exercise runs your emotional system—it decreases stress and toxins and lessens cravings, especially for sugar, fats and caffeine,” Dr. Lewis added. “Exercise generates a healthy cycle: when you exercise and work the emotional system, a by-product is a lot of will power, which helps maintain your resolve, especially when making good food choices. Exercise changes everything on a mind, body and spirit level.”

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