

Your Nutrition Game Plan



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International Center
for Sports Nutrition
502 South 44th Street
Omaha, NE 68105

What Do I Eat Before I Compete?

Ask a dozen successful athletes what they eat before a competition and chances are you'll get a dozen different answers. The 'secret' of what to eat and what not to eat before a competition is no secret at all. You must simply find a way of eating that works for you - and stick to it.

The precompetition meal used to hold the spotlight in terms of how it could enhance performance. Now we know that the foods you eat every day to support your training do far more to enhance your performance than the foods you eat right before you compete. From a nutrition standpoint, there is little you can do in the few hours before an event that will drastically improve your performance.

Here's the best the precompetition meal can do for you: help you stay hydrated, top off your carbohydrate stores, provide blood glucose and leave you feeling physically and psychologically comfortable.

Considerations for Food Choices

There are no hard-and-fast rules for everyone to follow when choosing a precompetition meal. One consideration is your sport or event. If you are about to compete in an aerobic endurance event, such as a marathon, a triathlon, distance cycling or cross-country skiing, it may help you to "top off the energy stores in your body with a high carbohydrate meal.

Athletes who participate in sports like soccer, distance swimming, volleyball, basketball and hockey may also benefit from including carbohydrate foods and drinks in the pre-event meal. For power and sprint athletes, like football players, sprinters and baseball and softball players, the primary purpose of the precompetition meal is to provide some of the fluid and energy you'll need to stay comfortable and hydrated during the event.

While carbohydrate foods like pastas are often considered the cornerstone of the precompetition meal, it is important to note that other foods can be included in the pre-event meal. In fact, a high carbohydrate meal - like a dish of pasta - leaves some athletes satisfied, but a high carbohydrate, low (fat) meal leaves others uncomfortably hungry before competition. Some athletes find they are more satisfied and more ready to compete after the more traditional 'meat and potatoes meal.

The precompetition meal can't make a superhuman out of a mere mortal, but it can have devastating negative effects if the meal gives you an upset stomach. Practical approaches to the precompetition meal can help you avoid unwanted side effects like cramps, gas and diarrhea.

Handling the Butterflies

The adrenaline that flows when you are pumped before a game or a competition is a great performance booster, but these stress hormones can have a negative influence on your digestive tract. Nervous tension can have a definite effect on how well food settles. Some athletes feel nauseous, some get diarrhea. Knowing how your body reacts to precompetition jitters will influence your food choices.

For example, if you get diarrhea, you may need to decrease fiber and spicy foods a day or two before and the day of competition. If you get nauseous, you may find that meal-replacement drinks, shakes or smoothies settle better than solids.

Keep it Simple

Two simple rules will help you avoid disastrous side effects of precompetition eating:

1. Eat foods you like.
2. Eat the same kinds of foods you eat all the time.

The precompetition meal is not an experiment. It should be like a pair of old shoes...familiar and comfortable. Choose foods that you like, foods that you normally eat only foods that you tolerate, even when you re stressed. The day of competition is not the time to try a new food or beverage. This can be challenging when you re on the road, so plan ahead and make sure you II have the foods you like around, even if it means packing your own cooler.

What, where and when you eat the precompetition meal should be fairly consistent. Successful athletes often make precompetition eating part of the ritual of mental and physical preparation that occurs before the event.

If you have not yet determined your game plan for precompetition eating, start by writing down what you eat before and how you feel after several competitions. Make changes until you have figured out what works for you.

The precompetition meal can hinder your performance if you eat something that doesn't agree with you. It can help your performance if it leaves you physically ready and mentally prepared. The psychological and the physical aspects of the precompetition meal are important, but they will never outweigh the long-term nutritional, physical and mental preparation required for top performance.