

Precompetition meals

What's the purpose of the precompetition meal?

The precompetition meal serves two purposes:

- to keep you from feeling hungry before and during the event
- to maintain the levels of sugar in your blood for your muscles to use during training and competition.

Many athletes often skip meals before they train or workout, especially if the workout is in the early morning. Skipping meals or not eating before an early morning workout lowers the stored energy in your body and can impair your performance. This is particularly true if your workout involves endurance training that lasts for 30 minutes or longer.

When should I eat my precompetition meal?

Your stomach should not be full during your event. In general, it takes 1 to 4 hours for your stomach to digest a meal and empty it into your intestines. If you are nervous, that process may take even longer. Food that remains in your stomach during an event may cause stomach upset, nausea, and vomiting. If you

eat your meal 1 to 3 hours before the start of your competition, your stomach will be almost empty during the event.

What is a good precompetition meal?

Your pre-event meal should include foods that are high in carbohydrates, such as breads, pasta, fruits, or vegetables. Your stomach and intestines digest these foods quickly. Carbohydrates also help build up stored energy in your body for use later during your event.

To avoid stomach upset or nausea, the closer you are to the time of your event the less you should eat. You can have a liquid meal closer to your event than a solid meal because your stomach digests liquids faster. This is especially useful if you are nervous and tense.

If you compete at all-day events such as track meets, swimming meets, or tournaments, you may be tempted by whatever is available at concession stands. Consider the amount of time you have between your events, bring healthy foods, and plan accordingly. Suggested pre-event menus include the following: 1 hour or less before competition

- fruit or vegetable juice such as orange, tomato, or V-8, and/or
- fresh fruit such as apples, watermelon, peaches, grapes, or oranges and/or
- up to 1 and a half cups of a sports drink, such as Gatorade.

2 to 3 hours before competition

- fresh fruit, fruit or vegetable juices, and/or
- bread; bagels; English muffins with limited amounts of
- butter, margarine, or cream cheese; or low-fat yogurt; and/or
- up to 4 cups of a sports drink, such as Gatorade.

3 to 4 hours before competition

- fresh fruit, fruit or vegetable juices, and
- bread; bagels; baked potatoes; cereal with low-fat milk;
- low-fat yogurt; sandwiches with a small amount of peanut
- butter, lean meat, or low-fat cheese; and/or
- up to 7 and one-half cups of a sports drink.

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Does eating sugary foods before exercise improve performance?

Athletes sometimes consume simple carbohydrates such as honey, candy, or soft drinks right before exercise in hopes of getting quick energy. Unfortunately, eating sugary foods won't provide it. Most of the energy for exercise comes from foods eaten several hours or even days before the start of the race or event.

If you are an endurance athlete, recent evidence suggests that eating some sugary foods (like energy bars, some types of candy bars, or sports drinks) 35 to 40 minutes before an event may benefit you by providing energy (glucose) to your exercising muscles when your other energy stores have dropped to low levels. However, athletes are sensitive to having their blood sugar levels go up and down quickly. Eat-

ing sugary foods right before an event could harm their performance. Try different things and find out what works best for you.

Does caffeine improve performance?

Caffeine works by stimulating your central nervous system. In the past, researchers thought that caffeine improved endurance performance by stimulating a greater use of fat for energy so that less of the stored energy in your muscles (glycogen) was burned. However, more recent caffeine studies don't support this theory. When caffeine improves endurance, it does so by acting as a stimulant.

Caffeine does not help everyone. Some people are very sensitive and have side effects that include nausea, muscle tremors, and headaches. Too much caffeine can cause you to produce

more urine and lose more water, especially in hot weather. You could become dehydrated and hurt your performance.

The International Olympic Committee has placed limits on the amount of caffeine an athlete in international competition may use. Tablets containing caffeine taken before or during exercise should be used with caution due to their high levels of caffeine and the possibility of overdosing. What should I avoid for my precompetition meal? The hot dogs, doughnuts, nachos, potato chips, and candy bars found at most concession stands are very high in fat and not digested quickly. If you eat these foods as pre-event meals, they will likely be in your stomach much of the morning or afternoon. Avoid or limit eating these foods for your pre-event meal.