Precompetition Meals

What's the purpose?

The precompetition meal serves 3 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
- To provide a good balance of electrolytes and nutrients
- To supply high quality protein that is easy to digest to help prevent muscle breakdown

Many athletes skip meals before they workout, especially if the workout is in the early morning. If you do not eat before an early morning workout, it lowers the stored energy in your body and can decrease your performance. This is particularly true if you are doing 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 nausea and vomiting.

Every athlete is different in terms of when to eat the precompetition meal. A simple guideline is to eat your meal 1 to 3 hours before the start of your event, so your stomach will be almost empty during the event. Experiment with the timing of your precompetition meal to see what works for you.

What is a good precompetition meal?

Your pre-event meal should include 2 main calorie sources:
- Foods that are high in carbohydrates, such as breads, pasta, fruits, or vegetables. The body digests these foods quickly. Carbohydrates also help build up stored energy in your body for use later during your event.
- Foods that are a good source of protein.

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, plan ahead. The food from concession stands may not be your best choice. Consider the amount of time you have between your events and bring healthy foods.

Here are some ideas for what to eat before you compete:

1 hour or less before you compete
- Fruit or vegetable juice such as orange, tomato, or V-8
- Fresh fruit such as apples, watermelon, peaches, grapes, or oranges
- Up to 1 and a half cups of a sports drink
- Protein that is easy to digest, such as whey protein in liquid form (like a protein shake)

2 to 3 hours before you compete
- Fresh fruit, fruit or vegetable juices
- Bread; bagels; English muffins with limited amounts of butter, margarine, or cream cheese; or low-fat yogurt
- Up to 4 cups of a sports drink
- Protein that is easy to digest, such as whey protein in liquid form (like a protein shake)

3 to 4 hours before you compete
- Fresh fruit, fruit or vegetable juices
- 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
- Up to 7 and one-half cups of a sports drink
- Lean protein foods (avoid fatty or fried foods)

Does eating sugary foods before exercise improve performance?

Athletes sometimes have 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 that you eat several hours or days before the start of the race or event.

If you are an endurance athlete, eating some sugary foods (like energy bars, some types of candy bars, or sports drinks) 35 to 40 minutes before an event may provide energy (glucose) to your muscles when other energy stores have dropped to low levels. However, if your blood sugar levels go up and down quickly, eating sugary foods right before an event could harm your performance. There is evidence that eating whey protein before and during exercise helps you recover faster and decreases muscle breakdown. Also, drinks that contain both easily digestible protein and carbohydrates work better than carbohydrate-only drinks. Try different things to find out what works best for you. Never try new foods before competition unless you tried them in practice first.

Does caffeine improve performance?

Yes, caffeine can help improve athletic performance. Like other drugs, caffeine can provide some benefits but too much can lead to problems. It has been shown to improve coordination, endurance, and speed, even in moderate doses. The higher the dose, the larger the effect. However, higher doses also cause more side

effects. Some people are very sensitive and have side effects from caffeine such as nausea, muscle tremors, and headaches.

A common myth is that caffeine can cause an athlete to produce more urine and lose more water. Studies have shown caffeine does not have much of an effect on fluid status or electrolyte balances.

Caffeine binds to receptors in the brain, heart, skeletal muscle, and fat cells. It works mainly by stimulating your central nervous system. It increases heart rate, decreases feelings of pain and fatigue, and increases the burning of fat.

What should I avoid for my precompetition meal?

Hot dogs, doughnuts, nachos, potato chips, and candy bars 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 for several hours. Avoid or limit eating these foods for your pre-event meal.

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