

# Sports Nutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

The gut, also called the intestinal tract, includes the stomach, intestines, and colon. An amazing number of life-sustaining and performance enhancing events happen in the gut—including but not limited to digestion of the food we eat and absorption of nutrients that provide energy. While those of us with well-functioning "cast iron stomachs" are unlikely to think twice before eating any food that crosses our path, athletes with gastrointestinal issues (irritable bowel, diarrhea, celiac disease, reflux) are more cautious about what they eat.

Gut health can change; don't want to take it for granted. Rather, you want to properly feed those 100-trillion beneficial microbes that live in your gut; they have a big impact on your overall well-being. (*Hint:* Microbes like fiber-rich carbs!) Improper feeding, including long-term food restriction (anorexia, dieting) and a low fiber diet can reduce microbial diversity and have a detrimental health impact. A strong array of microbes in your gut enhances your immune system, reduces the risk of allergies, produces vitamins (K, B-12), optimizes absorption of nutrients, sends signals to the brain that make you more resilient to stress, and fosters anti-inflammatory and anti-carcinogenic benefits. A healthy gut enables athletes to access and utilize the fuels they need to perform longer, recover faster, and heal cells that get damaged during intense exercise. In comparison, athletes with unhealthy guts can spend more time sitting on the bench feeling unwell (including travelers' diarrhea).

Exercise itself is beneficial for gut health. Exercise with a fiber-rich diet (abundant fruits, veggies, beans, grains) is even better. Among elite athletes, those with a fiber-rich diet have a more robust microbiome compared to elite athletes with a lower fiber intake.

For sports-active people who want to feel good, perform optimally, and recover quickly from hard exercise, here are some suggestions about how to eat to optimize your gut health.

- *Figure out how to easily eat more fruit/veggies. Suggestions:*
  - Enjoy fruit with protein, such as banana+peanut butter or apple+cheese. For many athletes, the combo is more appealing/likely to be eaten than just a banana or apple.
  - Snack on dried fruit for sweet treats (instead of candy).
  - Buy frozen veggies (broccoli, cauliflower, peas, carrots, etc.) and eat a pile, not just a serving, at dinner. Freezing retains nutrients, so frozen veggies can be more nutrient-rich than veggies that lose nutrients during shipment from, let's say, CA to MA. Frozen veggies are also easier to incorporate into a busy athlete's sports diet. No prep—and they cost less! Cook leftover veggies to add to the next day's breakfast omelet or lunchtime soup.
  - Redefine your afternoon "snack" as a "second lunch" with quality fiber-rich food (peanut butter & banana sandwich on whole wheat bread) instead of snacky foods (chips, sweets). Fiber-rich foods leave you feeling nicely satiated with sustained energy and less evening hunger.

## The Athlete's Gut: Health & Performance

—Boost your intake of fiber-rich grains (bran cereal, oatmeal, Dave's Killer Bread, popcorn, brown rice), beans (hummus, burritos with refried beans, bean-dip) and nuts/seeds (nut butters, almonds, sunflower seeds). Note: Not all fruits and veggies are fiber-rich. The best options have seeds (raspberries, black berries, cucumber, cherry tomatoes) and edible skins (apple, pear, potato).

- Enjoy more fermented foods. Snack on yogurt; make a smoothie with kefir. Learn to like kombucha.

### Abating exercise-related GI distress

GI complaints vary according to sport. Cyclists in a bent-over position might suffer from heartburn or reflux. Marathoners with lots of intestinal jostling might experience "runners trots." Gymnasts and ballet dancers fear bloated, bulging stomachs. You are not alone if you exercise with GI distress! The following tips might help resolve current gut issues and reduce future digestive problems that could impact your sports performance.

- *Train your gut (not just your heart, lungs, and muscles).* Being "afraid to eat before you work out" because you fear experiencing nausea, stomach cramps, or diarrhea is a questionable excuse for avoiding pre-exercise food (particularly for endurance athletes and those who train more than 60 to 90 minutes a day). The gut is trainable and can learn to tolerate fuel consumed before and during exercise. You at least want to *try* to fuel your body appropriately for the work that you will be doing. Training on empty will do nothing to help you compete against a better fueled athlete.

Instead of simply insisting you *can't eat before you exercise*, be curious. What bad happens if you nibble on 25 to 50 calories of a simple, low-fiber grain, such as a pretzel, Vanilla wafer, or half-slice of toast? Likely nothing! Next, build up to 50 to 75 calories, then 75 to 100. The goal is to consume  $\pm 200$  calories in the hour or so before you train. The benefits: more energy, better workouts. During extended exercise, you want to build up to consuming 200 to 300 calories per hour after the first hour. Learn from each experiment; tweak as needed.

- Some commercial sports foods quickly lead to GI distress, so test different products during training, not on the day of the event. They might have too much caffeine or a type of carbohydrate that your body is not used to consuming on a daily basis. You might need to replace gels and chomps with honey and maple syrup. Both are available in single-serv packets for athletes.

**Conclusion:** Emerging evidence strongly suggests fiber-rich plant-based foods offer beneficial gut-health benefits that translate into overall health benefits not seen with highly processed low-fiber foods. Good gut health invites less inflammation, better recovery & well-being.

Nancy Clark MS RD CSSD counsels both fitness exercisers and competitive athletes in the Boston-area (617-795-1875). Her best-selling *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* is a popular resource, as is her online workshop. Visit [NancyClarkRD.com](http://NancyClarkRD.com) for more information.