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Eat For Exercise Benefits

I know, many of you are exercising to help manage your weight in addition to the cardiovascular benefits—which usually means trying to watch what you eat. However, eating (if done properly) will not only help you to maximize your exercise benefits, but can help you to lose weight as well. In fact, research has shown that a good diet can:

1. Help sustain intensity during long exercise sessions or competition.
2. Improve recovery from exercise, aiding in subsequent workouts or late rounds of tournament competition.
3. Decrease risk for illness and injury during strenuous exercise programs.

Exercise doesn't drastically change your relative nutrient needs. It is still important to consume a balanced diet including plenty of fruits and vegetables. However, following some simple guidelines on how to eat before, during, and after a workout can certainly improve your performance and health while involved in any exercise program.

You should try to eat a good balanced meal three-four hours before exercise. Keep it high in carbohydrate, low in fat, and moderate in protein for the best combination of digestibility and staying power. Before and during exercise it is important to help maximize and maintain your body's stores of carbohydrate (known as glycogen)—the primary source for energy during intense exercise. This best way to do this is by consuming easy-to-digest carbohydrates in the form of fruits & grains, or sports drinks or gels. This becomes increasingly important for exercise sessions lasting over 1 hour.

The period immediately after exercise is the most critical time to help give your body the nutrients it needs for the recovery and rebuilding processes. Remember, physical gains aren't made during the exercise itself, but are a result of the adaptations that take place in your body during recovery. Right after exercise your blood and muscles are primed for these adaptations, and consuming some carbohydrates and a small amount of protein quickly (within 45 minutes) will maximize your muscular and cardiovascular recovery. This is not only important for exercise gains, but it helps with your immune system function as well.

Don't forget to stay hydrated! Dehydration not only impairs performance, but it can be life threatening in the form of heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Drink early, and drink often during exercise is the advice offered by the American College of Sports Medicine. And try to replace fluids lost during exercise as quickly as possible afterwards. Keep in mind that as you sweat you are losing electrolytes (mainly salt & potassium) as well as water. These are critical for fluid balance within the body, and cannot be replaced by water alone. A good sports drink is a convenient way to replace electrolytes, but it can also be done by pairing pretzels, crackers, or salted popcorn with water after your workout. Though lacking convenience, real foods usually offer nutritional benefits that you will not find in a supplement.

I also want to stress the importance of eating every meal (this includes breakfast!). Skipping meals puts your body in 'conservation mode', effectively decreasing metabolism and increasing breakdown of the muscle that you worked so hard to earn. Exercise nutrition can be as complex as you want it to be. While there are many advanced techniques employed by elite athletes, these simple principles have been demonstrated to keep you healthy and performing to your full potential. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*