

Carbohydrates



One of the most common diet myths is that carbohydrates are fattening. They are not! In fact they are low in fat and in calories they provide you with the fuel that is most easily used by your body. It makes sense, therefore, that carbohydrates should form such a large part of any runner's diet.

Try to have some carbohydrate (rice, potatoes, pasta or bread) at each meal and a high carbohydrate, low fat snack (a bowl of cereal such as porridge or a banana on wholemeal toast) 2-3 hours before exercise. This will provide you with energy but will have passed your stomach before the session, preventing you from feeling too full or sick.

Without carbohydrate, you will find it harder to burn body fat as a fuel and you will lack in energy that you need to train well. If carbohydrate stores are low, you will break down lean muscle to use as energy which can lead to poor recovery.

Carbohydrates are stored as glycogen in your liver and muscles, and are broken down into sugar by your body for energy. Different carbohydrates break down into sugar at different rates. For long lasting energy, choose wholemeal varieties.

Sugars



Sugar contains energy but no other nutrition. For runners, they can be a good source of quick energy. If you have had enough carbohydrate throughout the day, you are unlikely to need extra sugar when you are running, unless you are running for 90 minutes or more. However, for long runs, regular top ups of sugar (try jelly beans or running gels) are good ways to delay 'hitting the wall' when your glycogen has been used up and you start breaking down lean muscle for energy.

Protein



Protein is needed for the immune system, growth, repair and recovery of tissues but most people (even vegetarians) have more than enough protein in their diet.

Dairy - These foods are good sources of calcium, essential for strong bones, teeth,

nerves and muscle contraction. Try to choose the low fat versions (healthier for your heart and contain more calcium)

Meat, fish and alternatives - These foods also include nuts, pulses, tofu, beans and eggs. They are high in iron, essential for making haemoglobin, part of the red blood cell that carries oxygen around the body.

Fat



Fat contains the most calories of all the nutrients and it is more likely to be stored as body fat, rather than being used up. Luckily, the fitter you are, the better your body becomes at using fat as a fuel. Choose 'good' monounsaturated fats (olive oil and rapeseed oil) and polyunsaturated fats (vegetable oils and oily fish) as they are better for your heart than the saturated fats.

Fruit and vegetables



These are essential for you to get the vitamins, minerals and fibre that are essential for life and energy. Try to have 5 portions of fruit or vegetables per day (frozen, fresh, canned, dried and juices all count) and to vary your choices to maximise the range of nutrients. Dried or fresh fruit is broken down quite quickly by the body into sugar and is therefore a useful pre-run snack or, for longer runs, a way to top up your energy during the run.

