

UW Medicine

SPORTS, SPINE &
ORTHOPEDIC HEALTH

The Pre-Race Meal

The pre-race meal. There's got to be something magical about it. There has to be something you can eat that will give you more energy than you've ever had before and make it feel like you're flying OVER the wall instead of plowing headfirst into it. It's true. What you eat before your race is important, but keep in mind that it's the proper consistent training, adequate rest, and the well-balanced diet that you've been following all along that actually will get you to the starting line.

EAT SMART

You're probably already aware that for endurance athletes, the night before a race means pasta, and events will often host a pre-race pasta dinner. While it's tempting to take on the challenge of the "all-you-can-eat" buffet, I would advise that you save this for another time. Overeating will only make you feel uncomfortable and make it more difficult for you to get a good night's sleep. I do recommend, however, emphasizing the carbohydrates, including a moderate amount of protein, and drinking plenty of fluids, preferably the non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic types. Also, keep in mind that "emphasizing carbohydrates" does not necessarily mean spaghetti. It could mean rice or a large baked potato instead.

On the morning of the race, stick with foods that have worked for you on your training runs and walks. These are the ones that you know you can tolerate on an exercising stomach and that you know will sustain your energy for the duration of the event. Again, I'd recommend foods that are high in carbohydrate and low in fat. For many, this means choosing a piece of toast, or oatmeal and a banana instead of going for the Denny's Grand Slam Breakfast with 2 fried eggs, hash browns, and sausage links. Foods high in fat such as the eggs and sausage will take longer to empty from your stomach whereas the high carbohydrate foods like the toast and banana will be easily digested and less likely to cause stomach discomfort.

The scheduling of your pre-race "feast" can also prove to be a bit of a challenge, especially if the race has an early morning start time. You need to allow yourself plenty of time for digestion. As a general rule, the more calories you consume, the longer you should wait before exercising. For example, after a large meal, you should wait 3-4 hours before working out; 2-3 hours may be adequate after a smaller meal; and 1 hour may be sufficient after a small snack. If you're convinced that you need a full meal before the race then plan to get up early enough to allow yourself time to digest it. If you plan on staying in bed as long as possible then consider something lighter such as a banana or Power bar.

MAKE CHOICES

Again, I want to emphasize how important it is that you practice your selection of foods and timing of meals during your training sessions. What a training partner or coach recommends might not ultimately be the best choice for you, but it may be a good place to start experimenting. Don't just try what someone tells you works for them on race day unless you've tried it out on yourself first.

CONCLUSION

The pre-race meal. There's really nothing magical about it. It's simply sticking to a routine that you've found works for you. By practicing during your training, you should find that your pre-race meal will not only fuel your body but also your confidence and leave you with one less thing to worry about on race day.