

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

*"What percent of my calories should come from carbs, protein and fat?"*

*"Orange juice has 24 grams sugar. Isn't that bad...???"*

*"I stopped eating peanut butter; the label says it has 16 grams of fat!!!"*

If you are like many active people, you feel totally confused about what to eat. You listen to a plethora of nutrition experts, read food labels, and then try to piece the information together to build a better sports diet. Yet, you end up with lots of questions, like what percent of calories should come from carbs, protein and fat: 40-30-30% or 60-15-25%?

According to the American Dietetic Association's *Position Stand on Nutrition & Athletic Performance*, percentages are not the way to calculate a sports diet. Here's an example why:

- If you are a light-weight rower trying to drop five pounds to make weight and are eating only 1,600 calories a day, 10 to 15% of calories from protein translates into 160-240 calories of protein. That's the equivalent of 40-60 grams protein. (There are 4 calories/gram protein.) That's way too little. The rower who weighs 140 lbs. would need almost double that amount, because dieting athletes should target at least 0.8 grams protein/lb. body weight (1.7 g pro/kg).

**Assessing your sports diet:** Instead of getting overwhelmed by percentages of calories, I suggest you envision a dinner plate. The goal is for 2/3 to 3/4 of the plate to be filled with carb-based foods (such as brown rice and broccoli) and 1/4 to 1/3 with a protein-rich food (such as a piece of fish). The plate-method is far easier than calculating food plans!

If you are curious about your food intake and want to learn more about what you eat, you can track your diet on websites such as [www.MyDailyPlate.com](http://www.MyDailyPlate.com), [www.fitday.com](http://www.fitday.com) or [www.sparkpeople.com](http://www.sparkpeople.com). One key to calculating diets is to weigh and measure your food so you know how much you actually eat and not just guess. (*Hmm. I guess that's about 1 cup of oatmeal...*) Be honest now; people tend to change what they eat when they have to record it. Be sure to include the Munchkin someone brought into the office, the Hershey's Kiss from the candy jar, the French fry you snatched....

By tracking your intake for three or four days, you'll get a good snapshot of your training diet. Ideally, an athlete who routinely trains hard wants to consume about:

- 2.5 to 4.5 gram carbohydrate/lb body weight (6 to 10 g/kg)
- 0.5 to 0.8 gram protein/lb body weight (1.2 to 1.7 g/kg)
- the rest of the calories from fat (not less than 40 grams).

If you are consuming more than 2,000 calories of day from primarily nutrient-dense food, a diet analysis will also help you discover you likely consume abundant vitamins and get more than 100% of the Daily Value. (This may lead you to question if you actually need that vitamin pill after all!)

### **Making sense of information on food labels.**

Here are some food label questions my clients ask me about the carbs, protein and fats in their diets. Perhaps this information will help address your confusion as well.

*Q. Is it OK to have 2% milk (5 grams fat) on my cereal instead of watery skim milk (0 grams fat)? It tastes better and is satisfying.*

A. Yes, as long as you budget the rest of your day's fat intake. That is, if you enjoy 2% milk on cereal, then simply choose less mayo, cheese and fatty foods at other meals.

## Figuring Out Your Sports Diet: Tips for Label Readers

*Q. Should I avoid peanut butter because it has 16 grams of fat?*

A. No! About 25% of your calories can appropriately come from fat. That means the typical female athlete can enjoy 600 calories (~65 grams) of fat per day. Peanut butter can easily fit within your fat-budget. Plus, peanut butter's fat is health-protective. People who enjoy peanut butter and nuts five or more times a week reduce their risk of heart disease and diabetes by more than 20%. Enjoy peanut butter *twice* a day?!

*Q. The label says 2 tablespoons Skippy peanut butter has 3 grams of added sugar. Isn't that bad? Three grams of sugar equates to 12 calories of sugar. This is far less than the jelly that goes on a PB&J sandwich, as well as a fraction of the sugar in sports drinks and jelly beans. A standard guideline is 10% of calories can come from refined sugar. That equates to about 240 to 300 calories (60-75 grams) of sugar for most athletes. You can choose how you want to spend those sugar-grams.*

*Q. Should I avoid orange juice because it has too much sugar? All the calories in orange juice come from sugar, but along with that (natural) sugar, you get abundant vitamin C (boosts your immune system), potassium (protects against high blood pressure), folate (reduces birth defects) and numerous other health-protective nutrients. The sugar in orange juice (and any type of sugar, for that matter) fuels your muscles.*

While eating the whole orange is preferable to drinking the juice, any form of fruit is better than none. That is, if you aren't going to make time to peel an orange, grabbing a glass of OJ for a morning eye-opener is a fine alternative—and is far preferable to grabbing just a coffee-to-go.

*Q. The label on my protein bar contains it contains 20 grams of protein. How many of these bars should I eat in a day?*

A. What makes you think you need any protein bars at all? Most hungry athletes get the protein they need through normal meals and snacks. Consuming excess protein is a needless expense. Athletes who might benefit from protein bars include vegetarians, dieters or college students who eat limited meat from the dining hall. If that's your case, track your protein intake by using the websites mentioned above to see if your protein intake comes up short. If it does, make the effort to eat extra Greek yogurt, tuna or cottage cheese—excellent sources of protein with a lower price, better taste.

*Q. How many grams of protein should I eat in a day?*

A. For most active people, I recommend 0.5-0.8 grams protein/lb body weight (1.2 -1.7 g/kg). This equates to a moderate serving of protein-rich food at each meal (such as milk on breakfast cereal, sandwich at lunch, yogurt for a snack, fish for dinner.) Even if you want to build muscle, your need for additional carbs to *fuel* the heavy lifting is higher than the need for extra protein. Be sure to enjoy carb-protein combinations. Filling up on just protein will leave muscles unfed!

Nancy Clark, MS, RD, CSSD (Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics) counsels both casual and competitive athletes in her practice at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill MA (617-383-6100). For help balancing your diet, read her *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* and *food guides for new runners, marathoners, and cyclists*: [nancyclarkrd.com](http://nancyclarkrd.com). Also [sportsnutritionworkshop.com](http://sportsnutritionworkshop.com).

