

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

*"I think about food all the time. I finish one meal and start thinking about the next." ... "I don't keep cookies in the house; I end up eating them all." ... "I'm afraid if I start eating, I won't be able to stop..."*

If any of those thoughts sound familiar, you are among a large group of athletes who struggle with food. I routinely counsel food-obsessed exercisers/athletes who fear food as being the *fattening enemy*. They think about food all day, stay away from social events involving food, give themselves permission to eat only if they have exercised hard, and white-knuckle themselves to one meager portion at dinner.

If you (or someone you know) struggles with food, keep reading. This article can help food-obsessed athletes take a step towards transforming their food fears into peaceful fueling patterns and better quality of life. Much of the information is from Glenn Waller's book *Beating Your Eating Disorder*, an excellent self-help book for adults at war with food and their bodies.

*Food is not the problem.* Food is fuel. Food is health. Food is an inanimate object, just like a desk, rug, or book. It has no inherent power over you. If you believe a food (let's say, bread) has power over you, bread is the symptom, not the problem. That is, the urge to over-eat bread can stem from:

1. getting too hungry and craving carbs. The solution is to prevent hunger, so you don't start craving carbs.
2. denying yourself permission to eat bread because it is a "bad" food. The solution is to learn to routinely enjoy bread and other carbs, which are the foundation of a sports diet.

Living by rigid, restrictive "food rules" can be a symptom that something has gone awry. Food rules serve a purpose; they can be a coping strategy to block out emotions and distract you from feeling your feelings. That is, if you are spending 99% of your waking hours debating whether or not to eat bread, you are not thinking about how angry you are with your boy friend, how sad you are about the death of your cat, or how lonely you've been since the divorce.

Being able to abide by strict food rules also gives you a (sick) sense of superiority that you can say "no thank you" to pizza, sandwiches, and even birthday cake with your friends. You take pride in being able to sustain yourself on lettuce leaves and Diet Coke. Why would you want to change when you are so in control, have such a perfect diet, and are exercising seemingly well? Why? Because your quality of life stinks and you are losing your friends.

Some of my clients can revise their restrictive eating patterns with simple nutrition education. I teach them how much is OK to eat, how to fit bread (or whatever) into their sports diet, and how to enjoy food as one of life's pleasures. For example, one client believed eating more than an English muffin at breakfast sounded "piggy." After one English muffin, she stopped eating because she *"thought she should,"* but then would succumb to the hungry horrors by 9:30 a.m.. When she added a yogurt and an egg into her breakfast, she felt satisfied, with no nagging food thoughts until she was appropriately hungry at lunchtime.

In comparison, another client refused to eat more breakfast. She was convinced that eating an additional packet of

## When Food Has Too Much Power

oatmeal would result in immediate weight gain. *"I couldn't eat more breakfast. I'd get fat!!!"* She believed her body was different from everyone else's and would instantly blow up.

I taught her that hunger is simply the body's request for fuel. The body is saying, "I have burned off what you fed me. May I please have some more food?" Her response was *"NO! Food is fattening."* She lived her days feeling hungry all the time, lagging energy, enduring cold hands and feet, obsessing about food, feeling anxious she'd succumb to sweets, and avoiding social situations that involved food. Her food rules undermined her quality of life.

If this story sounds familiar, perhaps it's time for a change? But how can you break away from your restrictive food rules and start anew? One strategy is to understand that a few minutes of control (such as eating only one English muffin) can turn into a lifetime of misery. But a few minutes of anxiety (eating an egg, yogurt *and* an English Muffin) can contribute to a peaceful future of enjoyable meals. You have to learn to sit through the anxiety and see that nothing bad happens when you eat an appropriate amount of food.

While you may believe that eating more breakfast will make you instantly fat, try this experiment:

- Weigh yourself (first thing in the morning) on Day 1 of the experiment.
- Make one dietary change that you are sure will make you get fat (such as eating an egg, yogurt *and* English muffin).
- Maintain this one change for 7 days (without making any other food or exercise changes), then weigh yourself again.
- Repeat this experiment for another 7 days. Take the average of the weights. (Weight fluctuates due to shifts in water.)

Have you gotten fat? Doubtful. But take note: if the scale has gone up a tiny bit, the gain is likely due to replenishment of depleted muscle glycogen (carb) stores. For each one ounce of carbs stored in your muscles as glycogen, you also store about three ounces of water. Hence, do not obsess about a number on the scale. Rather, observe how much better you feel during the day and also during your workout.

While food experiments sound like a good idea, the reality is they can be very anxiety provoking and hard work. (If changing were simple, you would have been able to resolve your food issues ages ago, right?) Eating more calories is hard because you are giving up a coping mechanism without being sure you will feel better in the long run.

To get rid of your eating disorder, you need to learn how to cope differently. This will involve feeling your feelings, instead of starving them. A counselor might be able to help, as well as reading *Beating Your Eating Disorder* and other self-help books (visit [www.gurze.com](http://www.gurze.com)). Just imagine how nice life will be for you and your loved ones when you can wake up without food fears and rigid food rules?

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