

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

*"I should be pencil-thin for all the exercise I do." ... "I don't keep cookies in the house. If they are there, I eat way too many of them." ... "I'm afraid if I start eating, I won't stop."*

Too many athletes are at war with food and their bodies. In their quest to attain the "perfect body" that is leaner, lighter and presumably faster and better, they have developed atypical eating patterns that are far from peaceful. As one client reported, "I'm trying so hard to lose five pounds but I'm getting nowhere. In fact, I'm even gaining weight. I'm "good" at breakfast and lunch, but after I get home from the gym at night, I end up devouring everything in sight. On weekends, my eating is even crazier." Sound familiar?

**The problems with dieting.** The first three letters of diet are D-I-E. Dieting conjures up feelings of deprivation and denial. Dieting is unsustainable, no fun. Few dieters win the war against hunger. Even 50% of people who had gastric bypass surgery regained weight within two years.

Why does this happen? Because the body perceives a diet as a famine and strives to protect itself from starving to death by signaling hunger. Hunger leads to overwhelming urges to binge-eat. Research with normal-weight men who cut their food intake in half (similar to what many dieting athletes do) reports most regained the weight they'd lost—plus 10% more—within three months. Another study with middle school kids who were followed through high school indicates all efforts to lose weight resulted in disordered eating patterns five years later—but not leaner bodies. Dieting tends to create more long-term problems than it solves.

**How to find peace with food.** Let's take a look at some ways to transform blown diets into appropriate fueling (while you chip away at losing undesired body fat). A first step is to remember food is *fuel*, not the fattening enemy. Food not only enhances athletic performance but also prevents hunger and out-of-control food binges. As a human, you are supposed to eat, even if you are overfat. If you restrict your food intake, you also restrict protein, carbs, fats, vitamins, minerals and other bio-active food compounds that contribute to good health and high energy. Bad idea.

**Calories:** Current research suggests a sustainable way to lose undesired body fat is to knock off about 200 calories a day, such as 10 ounces of wine, 20 tortilla chips or one roll with butter. By knocking off the calories at the end of the day, you can lose weight when you are sleeping (as opposed to when you are trying to train and function during the day).

**Carbs:** Bread, bagel, pasta, rice, crackers—all those dreaded carbs—are *not* fattening. Your body does *not* readily convert carbs into body fat. Rather, your body preferentially burns carbs to fuel your workouts. If your muscles become carb (glycogen) depleted, you will feel an incessant, niggling hunger that can lead to non-stop snacking. You may believe you are eating because you are just bored, but your muscles are telling you they want carbs to recover and refuel.

Do not try to "stay away from carbs." Egg whites for breakfast, salad for lunch, and fish + broccoli for dinner

## Dieting Gone Awry: When Food Is Foe

leave muscles unfueled and your body unable to train and compete at its best. Oatmeal, whole grain breads, brown rice, and sweet potatoes are just a few wholesome suggestions.

**Protein:** Dieters need to consume a strong protein intake to help protect their muscles. That is, when you restrict calories, you burn not just body fat but also muscle tissue. Enjoy a protein-rich food (plus some carbs) at each meal and snack.

Protein is satiating; it helps keep you feeling fed and can curb your appetite. Dieters who eat protein (eggs) at breakfast stay full longer than those who eat just carbs (bagel, fruit, granola bar). By eating a enjoying a satiating breakfast, you'll be less likely to crave sweets and succumb to donuts.

**Fat:** Fat (preferably the "good" fat in nuts, fish, oil) is an essential part of a sports diet. It's required to absorb vitamins A, D, E and K. A little fat also gets stored right within the muscle cells and enhances long workouts. Runners who switched from a low (16%) fat diet to a moderate (30%) fat diet improved their performance by 14%. That's a lot! And, they did *not* gain body fat. Hence, "*Eat fat, get fat*" is false. Overeat *calories* and you will get fat, particularly if you overeat fat. Excess dietary fat easily converts into body fat.

**Vitamins:** The less fuel you ingest, the fewer vitamins you consume. Taking a vitamin pill might replace some of those losses, but a pill does not provide other bio-active compounds in foods that protect your good health. Strive to enjoy colorful vegetables and/or fruits at each meal.

By filling up on wholesome sports foods at daytime meals, you will ruin your appetite for the evening "junk food" that contributes to fat-gain. Eating "normal" meals will help you feel better during the day, have better workouts, be in a better mood and be able to knock off 200+ calories of evening snacks so you can lose weight easily when you are sleeping. **Easier said than done?** While food-binges can simply be the backlash from unrealistic efforts to lose a few pounds, they sometimes also serve the important job of distracting people from thinking about painful relationships and feelings of inadequacy. That is, if you incessantly think about food, you are *not* thinking about how sad, depressed or lonely you might be feeling. You'd rather focus on losing five pounds, believing weight loss will make you happy. Doubtful.

Instead of trying to find happiness from a number on the scale, the better bet is to appreciate your body for all the good it does. Do not compare your body to others. *To compare is to despair.* Practice eating mindfully and ask yourself before you eat "Does my body need this fuel?" Eat mechanically, on a time schedule, with even-sized meals that truly satisfy you, so you don't just stop eating because you think you should. To help create a positive food plan, consult with a sports dietitian; use the referral network at [SCANdpg.org](http://SCANdpg.org).

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