

How to Choose the Best Pre-Workout Snack for Health Body

What energizes one person may not satisfy another. Use these rules to discover the right fuel for you (whether it's oatmeal or Oreos).

ALEX VAN BUREN March 23, 2018

Right before a sweat sesh, some people swear by a handful of peanuts, or a specific brand of protein bar. And yet for others, the ideal option might be a ... Wendy's Frosty? Yep, a milkshake can actually have real pre-workout perks, according to Julie Duffy Dillon, RD, a nutritionist specializing in fitness. Read on to learn why—plus other helpful tips on how to fuel up right.

Pay attention to your body

Dillon, who has worked with high school, college, and professional athletes for 19 years, says the most crucial thing about picking a pre-workout snack is recognizing your individuality. “We can look at recommendations or nutrition books,” says Dillon, “but everyone is different in what feels best. The thing I always recommend to people who are wanting to move their bodies more and wanting to incorporate food is that it takes practice to figure out the best ways for you.”

Certified trainer and registered dietician Jonah Soolman agrees. “The first thing I say to patient when they come in with a sports and nutrition concern, whether it’s pre- or post-workout, is, ‘It always has to be individualized,’” he says. “There are certainly principles that apply to virtually everybody—say, for example, carbs before a workout,” he adds, but some things will vary.

Soolman, a marathoner, is a great example. “When I go for long runs, I drink Mountain Dew and eat Oreos,” he admits. “That’s what works best for my body. The way I found that was first trying things like Gatorade; that didn’t work for me so well.”

As you try various snacks, keep in mind that what works for your workout buddy might not wor

for you. "Our bodies are just different," says Dillon. "Some people feel super-energized by a mix of macronutrients. For others, it's carbs. We all metabolize differently, and we have to respect that."

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Don't shun carbs

Our carb-avoidant culture can present difficulty for those trying to find the best sustenance for workouts, the experts say. "People turn their noses up at sugar and carbs," says Dillon, but "from a sports point of view, you're keeping the fuel from your muscles."

The body tends to prefer carbohydrates, which digest quickly, as a source of quick fuel. Though both experts point out that there are always exceptions, for the majority of us, completely avoiding carbs will make it more difficult to exercise effectively. "My body feels like dead weight today," is a phrase Dillon has heard from the occasional paleo client.

Time your pre-workout snack wisely

When you're choosing what to eat, also consider how long it will be until you exercise.

If you're eating hours in advance of your workout—say, two hours before a soccer game, says Soolman—you can have a well-rounded meal, since "that's a pretty good amount of digestion time," says Soolman. (Think: carbs, protein, and fat.)

An hour before your workout, says Soolman, you should be thinking more about "a ratio of food [that is] heavier on carbs. Protein and fat could slow digestion and make you not feel great during the workout." Consider yogurt, which yes, has protein and fat, but is heavy on carbs, or a couple pieces of fruit, he suggests.

Immediately before a workout, says Soolman, "we're thinking pure carbs: maybe juice, Gatorade, saltines, pretzels, a piece of white bread—something to digest and absorb really quickly." He adds "when you're about to do a workout, you don't want to do necessarily something that's high-protein or high-fiber." Complex foods can cause stomach issues, depending on the workout. (Again, says Soolman, there's always an exception, including the ultra-marathoner Dean Karnaz

who famously ate a whole pizza while running.)

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Be adventurous

“People think, ‘bananas, protein, sport drink,’ which I think is fine, but could also get really boring,” says Dillon. “Don’t be afraid of a bagel with peanut butter on it or chocolate milk. Things that feel appealing any time could also be very energizing for your sport.”

As opposed to getting hung up on which snacks are “healthy” (which can feel “loaded and ambiguous”), make sure 1) you’re getting enough food; 2) you have something you can snack on halfway through a long workout; and 3) you don’t discount options just because they seem odd, says Dillon. She has seen people have success with grub as eclectic as grilled cheese sandwiches, trail mix, and yes, that Frosty, which she says is “absolutely” not a problem. “[I]t’s fat will keep it in your stomach longer” on a long run, she says—and that means more energy.

Stay hydrated, too

“Make sure you listen to your body,” says Dillon. “When you’re thirsty, make sure you have some [water].” She reminds us that it’s better for the body to sip on water throughout the workout (and beforehand, and after) than to drink a lot at once. And a good general rule of thumb, she says, is that “a person working out for 45 minutes should make sure to stop and get some then” to replenish the fluid you’ve lost through sweat.

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Don’t exercise hungry

There are definitely various schools of thought on this point, but Dillon is not a fan of exercising hungry: “Rumbles of hunger will put your energy level in toilet.” She suggests bringing something with you that you enjoy, such as a granola bar or trail mix, just in case. Allow yourself to experiment, too, she says. Really listen to your hunger, and provide for yourself. And sometimes

lack of snacks isn't the culprit: "Sometimes the best way to provide nutrition with sport is to make sure we're eating more nourishing meals throughout the day," she says.

Go ahead and eat mid-workout

Again, like the pizza-eating ultra-marathoner, it's OK to snack as you go. Around the 30-minute mark of a high-intensity workout your glycogen store will get depleted, says Dillon. "Having a snack within half an hour of that exercise is something that's traditionally recommended. Some people need it further out; some people won't want one." Experiment, and recognize your own needs.

If you're running long distance, try carrying quick-to-digest energy in the form of gels, Gatorade or whatever works for you.

Consider these options

Below are a few suggestions from Dillon to get you started. But both dietitians agree that you need to find what works for you. (Some of Dillon's ideas, for example, such as peanut butter on bagel, might be too heavy for high-impact workouts.) So experiment, get creative, and be OK with what works for you.

A half hour before a low-intensity to medium-intensity workout, try...

A handful of Dates

Nature's Made Crunchy Granola Bar

Oatmeal with fruit

A piece of toast with nut butter

Dried fruit

An apple or pear

Graham crackers

One hour before a longer, endurance workout, try...

A bagel with peanut butter

Pineapple and cottage cheese

Peanut butter Toast

Turkey-avocado wrap

Pita with tuna salad

Chocolate milk

A bagel sandwich with egg

A sliced apple with cheese on crackers

Greek yogurt with granola

Egg-and-cheese breakfast sandwich