



HOW'S YOUR TIMING?

“Is it bad to eat late at night?”

“How long before a game should I eat?”

“Is it good to eat a lot of small meals?”

Some of the most common questions about nutrition relate to timing of eating. Here are some quick answers to your questions about when to eat.

TIME OF DAY

Will all calories you eat after 6 p.m. turn to fat? Does breakfast have to be at 7 a.m. and lunch at noon? No. Time of day doesn't matter, as long as your body gets the nutrients and calories it needs.

The recommendation to not eat late at night is aimed at curbing couch potato behavior like downing a bag of chips during ER or polishing off a sundae with Seinfeld reruns.

Research shows that many people, who eat too much, eat many of their calories in the evening hours. If you overeat, no matter the time of day, the extra calories are stored as fat.

But eating at night is a must for many athletes whose schedules don't fit into conventional meal times. For example, if you practice until 7 p.m. and don't have an appetite until 10 p.m., then it is wise to eat a late meal. Otherwise, you deprive your body of needed nutrients and inhibit recovery.

The most important thing is to get the nutrients you need even if it's late in the day.

EATING BEFORE PRACTICE/COMPETITION

Rule #1 is that there are no rules except “know yourself.” A common recommendation is to eat 2 to 4 hours before an event. This time frame allows most of the food to be emptied from the stomach, while not leaving you overly hungry. A liquid meal serves as an excellent supplement for those athletes with sensitive digestion or “butterfly” stomachs on the day of competition.

But don't bet your game-winning socks that there's any magic to that range. Successful athletes have been known to break world records a few minutes after a full meal. Others prefer not eating at all before morning practices or competitions.

Finding the right timing for you is an individual matter. As you experiment with different time frames, keep a log of when and what you ate and document how you felt. Athletes will fall on both ends of the extremes, from those who need a long period of time between eating and activity and those who prefer to have a full stomach, and at every point in between.

As you determine your comfort zone by trial and error, here are a few tips.

Consider allowing at least three to four hours between a meal and practice/competition if you:

Participate in a contact sport with high risk of injury or likelihood of being hit in the stomach.

Lose your appetite or feel nauseous shortly before training or competition. Eating before your stomach gets “tight” allows you to get the calories you need and can prevent vomiting related to nervousness.

Get diarrhea shortly before or during the event. Nerves often make the digestive system “speed up.” Eating can stimulate the bowels even more. Spacing your meal well ahead of the event will help you avoid an untimely trip to the restroom.

Exercise in the heat. Dehydration increases likelihood of stomachaches, gas or stomach cramping.

Participate in a high intensity sport with a lot of running or jumping, for example, cross country running, soccer, volleyball or basketball. While some can handle a full stomach with no problem, the jarring taken by the body increases the risk of stomach discomfort.

Some athletes who participate in long events (tournaments, double-headers, all-day meets) like to eat shortly before hand and continue snacking during competition to keep energy high and prevent hunger.

Eat as close as 30 minutes before competition and eat during competition if you:

Feel uncomfortably hungry during the event. Hunger pangs can distract you from the task at hand.

Have a tendency to feel shaky or weak during the event. These can be symptoms of low blood sugar.

Participate in an endurance event and want to increase the carbohydrates available for energy.

EATING AFTER PRACTICE OR COMPETITION

The importance of eating after a workout is to get your body ready for the next practice or competition. For most athletes, eating a balanced meal soon after the activity helps guarantee getting enough fluid and calories for recovery.

Be careful if you are dehydrated, though. Putting food or a high calorie fluid in a dehydrated body can cause you to get sick. If you are dehydrated, drink first, then eat.

HOW MANY TIMES A DAY

Eating three square meals may be a tradition in the U.S. but this pattern doesn't always fit the needs of athletes. Some athletes need to eat small amounts frequently because of busy schedules and not wanting to be full right before a workout. Research at the International Center for Sports Nutrition shows that most elite athletes eat a minimum of four times a day (counting meals and snacks) and may eat up to nine times a day.

While frequent eating is not a problem, the other end of the spectrum is. It is difficult to get the nutrients you need and maintain mental alertness if you eat only one or two times a day.

Timing of eating is important, but the timing that is best for you is an individual matter depending on your schedule, your training, your sport and your body.

The preceding information was gathered from: American Red Cross, Community First Aid & Safety, Mosby Lifeline, 1993 and the U.S. Olympic Committee Sports Medicine Division and the International Center for Sports Nutrition, ©1999 U.S. Olympic Committee, Rosenbloom, Christine A., PhD, DR, Editor Sports Nutrition-A Guide for the Professional Working With Active People, The American Diabetic Association, Third Edition, 2000.