



## **WHAT DO I EAT BEFORE I COMPETE?**

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Ask a dozen successful athletes what they eat before a competition and chances are you'll get a dozen different answers. The "secret" of what to eat and what not to eat before a competition is no secret at all. You must simply find a way of eating what works for you- and stick to it.

The precompetition meal use to hold the spotlight in terms of how it could enhance performance. Now we know that the foods you eat every day to support your training do far more to enhance your performance than the foods you eat right before you compete. From a nutrition standpoint, there is little you can do in the few hours before an event that will drastically improve your performance. Here's the best the precompetition meal can do for you: help you stay hydrated, top off your carbohydrate stores, provide blood glucose and leave you feeling physically and psychologically comfortable.

### ***CONSIDERATIONS FOR FOOD CHOICES***

There are no hard and fast rules for all to follow when choosing the precompetition meal. One consideration is your sport or event. If you are preparing to compete in an aerobic endurance event, such as a marathon, a triathlon, distance cycling or cross-country skiing, it may help you to "top off" the energy stores in your body with a high carbohydrate meal. Athletes who participate in sports like soccer, distance swimming, volleyball, basketball and hockey may also benefit from including carbohydrate foods and drinks in the pre-event meal. For power and sprint athletes, like football players, sprinters, baseball and softball players, the primary purpose of the precompetition meal is to provide some of the fluid and energy you'll need to stay comfortable and hydrated during the event.

The precompetition meal can't make a superhuman out of a mere mortal, but it can have devastating negative effects if the meal gives you an upset stomach. Practical approaches to the precompetition meal can help you avoid unwanted side effects like cramps, gas and diarrhea.

### ***HANDLING THE BUTTERFLIES***

The adrenaline that flows when you are pumped before a game or a competition is a great performance booster, but these stress hormones can have a negative influence on your digestive tract. Nervous tension can have a definite effect on how well foods digest. Some athletes feel nauseous, some get diarrhea. Knowing how your body reacts to precompetition jitters will influence your food choices. For example, if you get diarrhea, you may need to decrease fiber and spicy foods the day before and the day of competition. If you get nauseous, you may find that meal-replacement drinks, shakes, or smoothies digest better than solids.

## ***KEEP IT SIMPLE***

Two simple rules will help you avoid disastrous side-effects of precompetition eating:

1. Eat foods you like.
2. Eat the same kinds of foods you eat all the time.

The precompetition meal is not an experiment. It should be like a pair of old shoes...familiar and comfortable. Choose foods that you like, foods that you normally eat and foods that you tolerate, even when you're stressed. The day of competition is not the time to try a new food or beverage. This can be challenging when you're on the road, so plan ahead and make sure you'll have the foods you like available, even if it means packing your own cooler.

What, where, and when you eat the precompetition meal should be fairly consistent. Successful athletes often make precompetition eating part of the ritual of mental and physical preparation that occurs before the event.

If you have not yet determined your game plan for precompetition eating, start by writing down what you eat before and how you feel after several competitions. Make changes until you have figured out what works for you.

The precompetition meal can hinder your performance if you eat something that doesn't agree with you. It can help your performance if it leaves you physically ready and mentally prepared. These psychological and the physical aspects of the precompetition meal are important, but will never outweigh the long-term nutritional, physical and mental preparation required for top performance.

*The preceding information was gathered from: American Red Cross, Community First Aid & Safety, Mosby Lifeline, 1993 and by 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.*