



Nutrition for Cyclists

Eating the right combination of carbohydrates and protein can help you become a stronger, faster cyclist, and help your muscles recover more quickly from each exercise session. What will suit you best depends very much on your level of training, your personal tastes and your digestive tolerances, although recommendations from other cyclists can be helpful too.

Before

Starting out with sufficient energy reserves is vital, but it's best to allow one to three hours after eating a proper meal before setting off, otherwise your body may not have had time to digest the food and for it to be available as fuel.

If it's been a while since you last ate and you're already peckish, or you're heading out first thing, think about grabbing a quick snack like a banana or energy bar, perhaps a slice of toast or half a bagel. Alternatively, a few swigs of a sports drink can give you a quick boost - these are easier to digest than solid food, and are a good source of carbohydrate if you can't stomach anything more substantial.

Keeping hydrated while training is also an absolute must. As a rough guide, try to drink 500ml of water, diluted juice or a sport drink two hours before a ride, and another 150ml just before you leave.

During

If you plan to ride for less than an hour, plain water should be all you need to top up your fluid levels while you're out. Exercise for longer, though, and you may find sports drinks helpful. These usually contain sugar, maltodextrin and electrolytes including sodium - the exact constitution will vary between manufacturers. Experiment with several varieties to see what suits you best, and which flavours you prefer.

For long rides (over 60 minutes), consider taking a snack with you so you're not left running on empty. Energy gels washed down with water will give you an added boost, as will jelly beans or a banana.

After

Replacing fluid after a ride is just as important as before and during. Drinking around 500ml of water or diluted juice in the first 30 minutes after your ride should be plenty, but if you have a headache or feel nauseous you should have more. Avoid drinking too quickly and feeling bloated.

After hard sessions, especially if you plan to train again the next day, think about having a recovery drink. The carbohydrate-protein ratio of these drinks will speed up muscle repair, rehydrate you quickly, and give your immune system a boost.

Energy bars are also good for topping up your fuel reserves when you get back. Like recovery drinks, they contain a mixture of carbohydrate and protein that will help your muscles recover faster. Other good post-ride snacks include eggs or beans on toast, a fruit smoothie and a peanut butter sandwich. Try to eat within half an hour of completing your ride, as this will maximise the refuelling benefits.



How to time it right:

Many cyclists know exactly what they should eat and when they should eat it. It's the practical application of this theory that messes them up. You are either ravenous when you don't want to be - during training - or not hungry when you should be - immediately after training. The problem is that when you are planning your ride around a busy work schedule, your brain, leg muscles and stomach don't always stay in sync. An early-morning ride, for example, can leave you feeling fatigued during your working day. A midday training session may become no more than an afterthought if hunger overrides your motivation. And an after-work jaunt may press your dinnertime perilously close to bedtime.

Early Birds:

To eat or not to eat? That is the eternal question of those who like to ride as the sun is coming up.

The answer is, if you can, you should fuel up before your morning ride. This performs two functions. First your muscles receive an energy supply to help you power through the ride. Secondly, your entire body, especially your brain, receives the fuel and nutrients it needs for optimal functioning. It shouldn't be a surprise that studies support this and that eating before a ride boosts endurance compared with fasting before. People who eat before exercise rate the exercise as better and as less rigorous compared with those who fast. Here are a few refuelling strategies for both types of morning exercisers.

Early risers

Choose high-carbohydrate foods that are low in fat and moderate in protein. Aim for about 400-800 calories, which will fuel your training without making you feel sluggish. Drink about half a pint of water one-two hours before your ride to offset sweat loss.

Try these 400 – 800 calorie pre-ride breakfasts:

- Two slices of toast and a piece of fruit
- Cereal with skimmed or semi-skimmed milk and fresh fruit
- A toasted bagel topped with low-fat cheese and tomato slices

Late sleepers

Most cyclists fall into this category and don't have time to eat and digest a full meal before they head out of the door. If you fall in to this camp, experiment to see what you can stomach before you train. Here are a few suggestions:

- Half a pint of a carbohydrate drink
- An energy gel washed down with plenty of fluid
- Half a bagel and a cuppa

A high-carbohydrate evening meal should power you through your pre-breakfast ride.

For both types

Whether you are an early or a late riser, your body needs calories from carbohydrate, protein and other nutrients after you have finished riding. A recovery meal will help fuel your morning at work, preventing post-ride fatigue. Eat within an hour of finishing your training and be sure to include both carbohydrate and protein. Here are some options:

- A fruit smoothie made with a tablespoon of protein powder
- Eggs on whole wheat toast and fruit juice or fresh fruit
- Leftovers from dinner – pasta, soup, chilli or even vegetable pizza

The Lunchtime Crowd

People who cycle during lunch hours sometimes find that hunger gets the better of them. By noon, your fuel from breakfast is long gone and your blood sugar may start to dip. Rather than increasing the size of your breakfast (which may just leave you feeling sluggish), you should bring a light, pre-ride snack to work.

Remember the following three points as your ride:

- Timing: eat one to three hours before you ride to allow enough time for the food to leave your stomach
- Quantity: eat 100 – 400 calories, depending upon your body size and what you had for breakfast
- Content: select foods that are rich in carbohydrate, low in fat and moderately high in nutrients

Try these mid-morning snacks:

- A breakfast or energy bar with five grams of fat or less
- One slice of whole wheat toast topped with fruit spread
- A 75g serving of dried fruit with a can of vegetable juice
- One packet of instant oatmeal made with skimmed milk

Post lunch cycle

The obvious problem with lunch hour exercise is that you don't have time for lunch. But you need fluid and food to recover and fuel your brain for the rest of the working day. Packing your own lunch becomes a must, unless you have a work cafeteria where you can grab food for desktop dining. Packed lunches don't have to take a lot of time.

Try these tips:

- Opt for convenience and shop for lunch items that save time such as yoghurts, raisins, nuts and cereal bars
- Always add fruit. Toss one or two pieces of fruit in your lunch bag for a reliable source of nutrient-packed carbohydrate
- Make the most of leftovers. Choose any food from the previous night's dinner you've already packed in a sealed container ready for transport, reheating and eating

Evening Exercise

After a stressful day at the office, there's nothing like a cycle ride to burn off excess tension. The problem is that you sometimes don't feel like heading out of the door if you're hungry or just exhausted. If you do manage to ride, sometimes you return home so ravenous you eat everything in sight as you make your evening meal. Then you eat dinner late and end up going to bed on a full stomach.

What to do?

It's very simple, just stick to the following two principles:

1. Eat healthily during the day to avoid any intestinal upset that might thwart your training plans. Eat little and often and enough that you're adequately fuelled for your session to avoid the 'I'm too hungry' excuse.
2. Eat lightly after exercise to recover well without causing digestion to interfere with your sleep.

Here are some tips for evening exercisers:

- Never skip breakfast. Eat at least 500 calories for your morning meal. For example, quickly throw together a fruit smoothie made with yogurt, fruit and juice. Or try cereal topped with nuts, skimmed milk and a piece of fruit
- Make lunch your main meal of the day. Focus on high-quality protein, such as tofu or chicken, or pulses and grains, with fresh fruit.
- Always eat a mid-afternoon snack. Around two - three hours before your ride, eat a snack of fruit or an energy bar together with half a pint of water
- Drink more fluids. Grab a drink as soon as you step through the door after your ride and keep drinking as you prepare your meal. This helps replace sweat loss and may prevent you trying to eat everything in sight
- Eat well to moderately at dinner. Your body will use those calories to stockpile fuel in your muscles.

Nutrition experts now believe grazing on five smaller meals through the day is better than eating three big ones. Why should this be? It's mainly because a steady food intake keeps your energy levels consistently higher. Also, when you graze, you never become overly hungry, so you don't get the urge to overeat. This makes weight control easier. You also tend to choose higher quality foods if you never let yourself become too hungry.

But which snacks are best?

- Bananas
- Carrots
- Cereal with skimmed milk
- Chocolate milk
- Cottage cheese
- Dried apricots
- Prunes
- Energy bars
- Fig rolls
- Fruit ice-lollies
- Fruit yoghurt
- Green soya beans
- Home-made pizza
- Hummus on pitta
- Individual cheese
- Kiwi fruit
- Popcorn
- Porridge
- Rice cakes with peanut butter
- Smoothies