

Balancing exercise and food can be challenging. You're working out, but you're hungrier. Or maybe you are adding time or intensity to your exercise routine and wonder if you are getting the nutrients you need. Knowing when and what to eat can help you keep your energy up and reach your specific fitness goals. Whether you are running a distance race, building muscle with strength training, or going for an energetic walk, avoid eating a heavy meal right before exercising. Keep in mind that if you are exercising for less than one hour a day, you probably do not need to eat more than what you normally eat.

## Guide for Meals and Snacks Before and After Exercise

Timing is key for fueling before and after exercising. Here are some suggestions based on timing:

### 2-3 Hours Before

**What to do:** Have a meal made up of carbs, protein, and some fat. Avoid high-fat meals, which can slow digestion and cause sluggishness and cramping.

**What to eat:** Meal example:

- 3-5 ounces lean chicken breast
- 1-1½ cups cooked rice
- 1 serving vegetables
- 8 ounces milk
- ⅓ cup of almonds

### 45-60 Minutes Before

**What to do:** Have mostly carbs, limit fiber and fat, and include a small amount of protein. Fat, fiber, and protein slow digestion.

**What to eat:** Example: Turkey sandwich with lettuce and tomato, small milk.

### Less Than 30 Minutes Before

**What to do:** It's best to not eat right before working out because it may cause stomach discomfort. But if you are hungry, have simple carbohydrates your body can easily digest and absorb so it's available to use as energy.

**What to eat:** Examples: Fresh or dried fruit, sports drink, sports jelly beans or gel, jelly sandwich on white bread.

### During Workouts Lasting More Than 1 Hour

**What to do:** Have a small serving of carbohydrate that you know you tolerate during exercise. Aim for about 30-60 grams of carbohydrate per hour.

**What to eat:** Examples: Sports drinks, gels, sports jelly beans, energy bar, dried fruit.

### After Your Workout

**What to do:** Have a nutrient-rich meal with carbohydrate and lean protein, which helps your muscles repair and replenish glycogen. Try to eat within 30 minutes to 1 hour after finishing an intense workout for best results.

**What to eat:** Example meal:

- Baked potato
- 3-5 ounces fish
- Salad with 2 ounces low-fat cheese and 2 tablespoons avocado

### Do You Need More Protein?

While protein is important, we don't actually need that much. It's a myth that eating excessive amounts of protein results in big muscles. Our bodies store extra protein as fat. Strength training that challenges your muscles results in muscle growth. Athletes who do strength training or long-distance exercise should aim to eat 1.2 to 2.0 grams of protein per kilogram of their body weight each day. This means a 180-pound man should eat about 14 to 20 ounces of protein per day, or 3 to 5 ounces of protein per meal and snack. Recent research shows that spreading protein throughout the day works better than eating it all at once. Try to eat about 15-25 grams of high-quality protein every 3-4 hours, especially after exercise.

Here are examples of protein amounts in foods:

- 1 egg = 7 grams protein
- 3 ounces chicken breast = 21 grams protein
- 1 cup cooked quinoa = 8 grams protein
- 1 cup of lentils = 18 grams of protein

### Hydration Matters

Don't forget about fluids. Drink enough water before, during, and after exercise to replace what you lose through sweat. After exercise, drink about 1.5 times the amount of fluid you lost to fully restore your hydration.