Many first-time marathon runners and those wanting to improve their marathon time, are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available about fuelling for marathons. This article is the first in a short series of nutrition and fuelling strategies for the standard 26.2 miles / 42.2 km marathon and also for ultra marathons.

There are many excellent detailed studies available which can be incredibly informative for those who want to study things in more depth. These can be “heavy going” for a mere mortal with little spare time, who really just wants to run, and feel good while they are doing it!

Here we will try and keep things simple. We will deal with some general nutritional guidelines for marathons in this first article, plus some specifics for immediately before, during and after your marathon race.

Future articles will go into more detail on some aspects of nutrition and fuelling for marathons and ultras, and deal with short-to-medium ultras of up to 50 miles and 100km, then the longer ultras of 100 miles and 24 hours which are becoming increasingly popular. Then there is the more specialised zone of the multi-day events.

Adapting your Nutrition for Marathon Training

Whatever sport you take part in, if you are training regularly, and – as in the case of training for a marathon – you are steadily increasing the volume and workload, you are asking more of your body, and it is important to understand this.

Imagine if you were a car. The fuel and maintenance needed for short journeys around town or country is minimal to what you need for regular long journeys. Although the body has a seemingly miraculous way of adapting up to a point when you ask more of it, like a car, if you don’t refuel and maintain it, it will run out of fuel eventually and start misbehaving or come to a complete standstill.

Carbohydrate and the GI Index for Runners

Carbohydrate is the main body fuel, along with protein and fat. Most runners understand the importance of eating a lot of carbohydrate. The key to re-fuelling well and consequently training well over a period of time, can be influenced by the type of carbohydrate eaten. Readers will probably be familiar with the terms refined and unrefined carbohydrates. These have been defined more clearly with the development by sport scientists and dieticians of the Glycemic Index (GI).

The GI grades carbohydrates on a scale of 1-100. Refined or simple carbohydrates, high on the GI index, are rapidly digested and absorbed by the body, and result in a quick increase in blood insulin concentrations. Unrefined or complex carbohydrates are lower on the GI index, absorbed more slowly, giving a slower build-up of blood insulin levels.

Why, might you ask, should I be concerned about blood insulin levels? Well simply put, the aim in training over a period of time is to try and maintain a steady level of blood insulin levels and not have a yo-yo effect where the levels are rising and falling. Foods that are low on the GI list are more likely to help keep your blood glucose levels stable and give a steady supply of energy, which is great for the overall picture through the weeks of training.

Foods that are high on the GI index are more likely to cause the yo-yo effect. That is not to say they are totally bad. From a performance and training point of view, they can be useful when a quick burst of energy is needed on a hard training effort or a long run, or when used purposefully on race day itself.

Examples of high GI foods are cakes, biscuits, glucose and white bread. Examples of low GI foods, which are more slow release are porridge, most vegetables, grains, nuts and wholemeal bread. Nutrition is a vast subject that we cover in the Running Nutrition section of this site as well, but the old adage of a good all-round diet with plenty of fruit and veg still holds sound.

The Week or so Before Your Race

Much has been written over the years about carbohydrate intake in the week before a marathon event, some of it conflicting. The legendary British marathon runner Ron Hill was one of the first advocates of the carbo-loading diet, and its effectiveness still creates much discussion amongst experienced coaches and runners.

For mere mortals just wanting to finish their first marathon, or to take things a little more seriously, it will be good in the final 6-7 days before your big race to concentrate on reducing your carbohydrate intake a little in the early part of the week, then increasing the carbohydrate intake for the final 3-4 days before the race. This will result in a boost to the carbs stored in the muscles. Foods low on the GI index are good throughout your tapering phase, so that blood glucose levels maintain a steady state.

Nutrition for Race Weekend Itself

A light breakfast a couple of hours before the start is good to ensure you have a full fuel tank. Some wholemeal toast (low GI) with a banana is perfect, as is the need to keep sipping fluid regularly. Do practice this routine on your long training run days, to simulate race start time.

Nutrition for Post-Marathon Recovery

The best and simplest advice is that **recovery starts as soon as you cross the finishing line of your race**. This is true for training runs as well. Have a drink or snack ready to start consuming within minutes of finishing, as soon as you have settled down. High GI (sugary) snacks are good here to give a quick boost. It will really start (and speed up) the recovery process.