

In [Part 1 of Nutrition for Marathons and Ultra Marathons](#) we touched on ongoing training and the GI index, in this article we will deal with some specifics of the week or so before the race.

As we have said before, there are many excellent detailed studies available which can be incredibly informative for those who want to look at 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.

## 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. So what should you be eating in the final week before your race and is there any merit in what has become known as carbo-loading?

The body's two main energy sources are fats and carbohydrate. Carbohydrate is stored as glycogen in the body and this is more readily available to use as energy than fat. So that is why you constantly hear the marathon runner's mantra of “eat more carbs”, and why in the 3-4 days before a marathon or an ultra race, you need to load your body with extra carbohydrates. In normal training, if you build things up slowly, you can usually run for 90 minutes without having to draw too much on extra reserves. The longer you exercise, the more these natural stores are depleted, leading you to draw on extra carbohydrate supplies. When these are exhausted, your body starts burning fat. We have all had the experience of energy fade at the end of longer training runs!

The essence of the original carbo-loading diet was that on the weekend before your race, you went for a steady run that would leave you feeling tired, and would deplete the system somewhat. The 3 days after this (Mon, Tues, Weds) were days where the diet was low in carbohydrate but high in protein and fat. Also you continue training at a moderate level. After the 3 days of low carbohydrate, your body is almost demanding more. So on the Thursday, Friday and Saturday, or the 3 days before your race, you do the reverse and increase the carbohydrate intake while reducing the fats, and at the same time really reduce your training right down. This ensures you are fully loaded with glycogen for your muscles to draw on, on race day.

Although some elite and club level athletes still use the dedicated carbo-loading regime, many runners (especially mere mortals just wishing to finish or improve their previous times a little on their last race), use a modified version. This involves just increasing the carbohydrate intake in the 3 days before the race, resulting in a boost to the glycogen stored in the muscles and the liver.

So can one eat any carbohydrate to one's heart's content? Unfortunately no, not if you want to perform to your best, whatever your standard. If you stuff yourself needlessly, you will just feel bloated, so strike a balance between eating well and going over the top. It is a good idea to experiment eating a lot more carbs, on the day or two before one of your long training runs. Also if your race has an early start, don't eat too late in the evening, or it will not have a chance to fully digest, and will still be lying in your stomach in the morning! If possible try and emulate the start time of the race on one of your training runs too. This will allow you to see how you react and benefit.

Foods such as pasta, potatoes, bread and rice, which are high in starch, should increase your body's glycogen supply. Some protein and fat is also beneficial, but try going easy on high dairy foods like cheese sauce with

pasta, go for a lighter tomato based option instead. If you just can't face eating huge portions of pasta and potatoes, try an energy drink rich in carbs, like [SIS Go Energy](#) or [High Five Energy Source](#). This will still vastly increase your carbohydrate intake in liquid form, and although everyone is different, should avoid the heavy feeling of a big meal.

As far as regular fluid intake is concerned, it goes without saying that your aim is to go to the start line, as before all your long training runs, well hydrated. You don't want to change too much from your training routine for race weekend, but an extra litre or two of fluid for the 3 days before your race will definitely help. If you prefer, adding an electrolyte tablet like [NUUN](#) or [High 5 Zero](#), in a fairly weak solution, will ensure both fluid and the body's natural electrolytes (like sodium and potassium that are lost in sweat) are also well topped up.