

What to Eat Before Running



What we eat in the few hours before a run can be a crucial factor in how good we feel during a workout. Do you grab a few biscuits as you head out the door? Or roll out of bed and straight out for a long run on an empty stomach? We all have differing metabolisms and tolerances for different foods so your favourite snack might not work for your running partner. The best thing is to experiment to find out what works best for your body. There are quite a few variables such as length and intensity of run, time of run and your own unique metabolism and food preferences. Here are a few guidelines in what to look for.

The main fuel our body uses comes from carbohydrate which we store in our muscles and liver as glycogen. We can only store a limited amount of glycogen so it's crucial to keep supplies topped up. As a

rough guide you should leave three to four hours before running after a large meal and half an hour to two hours after a snack. When you leave too long between eating and running you risk low blood sugar causing light-headedness or fatigue. Ensuring you have steady blood glucose levels means you can complete your run feeling strong.

A useful tool for helping runners choose the right foods is the glycaemic index (GI). The glycaemic index is used to rank foods according to how quickly they convert food into energy. Foods with a high GI will give the most rapid rise in blood sugar, making them ideal for during or after running. These foods should be mixed with lower GI foods before a run in order to slow that release and give more sustained energy. For example a baked potato, which has a high GI should be eaten with a low GI filling like cheese, hummus or baked beans. The other thing to bear in mind is to try to include some protein and a little healthy fat in your meal or snack, these will also slow the release of carbohydrates.

Many people find they can run on an empty stomach first thing in the morning if their run is less than an hour. If you like to head straight out the door try fresh or dried fruit, yoghurt or an energy bar. These would also be good choices if you find you've missed your regular afternoon snack and need something within half an hour of running. For a longer run or a race you will need to have something more substantial an hour or two before running such as porridge, eggs on toast, granola with yogurt and fruit. If you struggle to eat in the morning try a smoothie and make sure to have a good snack just before going to bed to keep your glycogen levels topped up.

Another factor in fuelling your body optimally is to eat foods as close to their whole natural state as possible. Try to limit your intake of processed food and 'white' foods: white bread, pasta, potatoes and refined sugar. These foods might give quick release energy but they have little nutritional value. Swap white bread and pasta for wholegrain or gluten-free versions, sweet potato instead of regular potato.

Despite their best efforts some people still suffer from digestion issues or stitches when running. Try keeping a food diary for a week, noting how you felt during a run. This can help identify which food types are causing you trouble. If you suspect certain foods are not agreeing with you try giving them up for a week and see if you feel any difference.

To try and give an idea of what a group of runners fuelled up on I did a quick survey around Run and Become staff. The overwhelming favourites were bananas, porridge and energy bars, eaten anything from half an hour to two hours before running. Other choices were bread and honey, wholemeal bagel with banana and peanut butter, smoothies, raisins, cereal, jaffa cakes, oats soaked in milk with chia seeds.