



Eat to Run for Life

Wendy McMillan
Trail Runner Magazine

Though running can be an energizing fountain of youth, no one is impervious to time's steady tick. After age 30, you start to lose muscle mass and bone density begins to decline by 40. Joints gradually become less flexible and more injury-prone. Running, in particular, puts you at risk for injury, and recovery from intense workouts or high mileage takes longer. The good news is that eating enough of the right foods can satisfy your body's changing nutritional needs and keep you healthy and running for life.

Load Up on Antioxidants

All activity, even breathing, subjects your body to damaging "free radicals." These unstable molecules, unavoidable byproducts of oxidation, turn healthy cells into unhealthy ones by stealing their electrons. The resulting cellular damage increases risk and severity of disease, and speeds up the aging process. "Antioxidants, which offer up their own electrons, help repair and rebuild the damage done by free radicals," says Dr. Christine Gerbstadt, a registered dietician (RD) and marathon runner in Sarasota, Florida.

Antioxidants are found in vitamins A, C and E, known as the "powerhouse trio," and are plentiful in fruits (especially berries) and vegetables. Antioxidants are also found in nuts, seeds, whole grains and even tea and coffee. Studies show they dramatically reduce post-workout muscle soreness, which leads to quicker recovery.

Don't Count Calories, but Make Calories Count

Though runners don't typically need to worry about the scale readout, in your mid-30s your metabolism starts to slow. Keep your waistline from expanding by choosing foods low in, or free of, refined flours and sugars that have no nutritional value. "Runners often feel hungry because they burn so much energy," says Tara Gidus, RD and team dietitian for the Orlando Magic. Balanced meals that include a variety of nutrients will provide "calories that fill you up instead of filling you out," says Gidus. A sample meal: a whole wheat tortilla with two to three ounces of grilled chicken, a half cup of pinto or black beans, lettuce, tomato and a half cup of brown rice and side of fruit.

Prioritize Fibre

Fibre does more than simply make you feel full. Digestion becomes more difficult as we age, so fibre helps maintain digestive regularity. While the recommended daily amount decreases slightly for people over 50 (to 21 grams from 25 for women, and 30 grams from 38 for men), the number assumes a lower overall caloric intake.

Soluble fibre (found in oats and beans) also removes cholesterol from the bloodstream by absorbing it like a sponge. Insoluble fibre (from bran, fruits, vegetables and whole grains) helps move waste through the bowels. "Plus these foods are satiating, providing feelings of fullness," says Gidus.

Pump Some Iron

"Iron is an essential mineral for making healthy red blood cells and moving oxygen to working muscles," says Lona Sandon, RD and associate professor at the University of Texas Southwestern. Strenuous exercise, like running, breaks down red blood cells that are then expelled in the urine. Endurance athletes also lose small amounts of iron through sweat.

But iron-rich foods, such as meat, replenish your red blood cells. Vegetarian iron sources include pulses (the edible seeds of legumes) like lentils and beans, and leafy green vegetables. These are less easily absorbed than meat sources, so pair them with foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits, bell peppers and tomatoes.

Power Up With Protein

Running increases your protein needs for muscle and tissue repair. "Replenish protein 15 to 20 minutes after running, or at least within an hour," says Gerbstadt. "This can reduce muscle loss and replace glycogen most efficiently." The enzymes responsible for making glycogen are most active immediately following a workout, which means the longer the gap until you eat protein, the slower your muscles refuel and repair themselves. Studies show carbohydrate-to-protein ratios of 3:1 or 4:1 to be most beneficial. You can find these pre-measured ratios in recovery drinks or Gerbstadt's favourite, low-fat chocolate or soy milk.

But protein is not just a post-run necessity. If you take a long time to recover from hard runs or heal from injury, you may be protein deficient. Research has shown that the body cannot absorb more than 30 grams of protein per meal, so spread your protein intake throughout the day. Consume one gram of protein per kilo of body mass from sources such as fish, chicken, beef, whey and eggs. Therefore, a 160-pound person should aim for three 25-gram servings of protein daily.

Boost Immunity With Zinc

Zinc is required for cell reproduction, tissue growth and repair and aids in converting food to fuel. By grace of running's wear and tear and calories burned, runners deplete zinc stores more rapidly than their less active peers. And recent studies link zinc depletion in endurance athletes with a compromised ability to fight off illness and infection.

This is especially true as we age, when certain cellular processes, such as antibody production, tend to be less efficient, particularly after age 70. A basic multivitamin containing about 15 mg of zinc will satisfy your zinc needs.

Keep Up the Calcium

While running's high-impact stress strengthens bones, it also puts them at risk. Like iron, traces of calcium, which is crucial for bone building and strengthening, can be lost in sweat. Intense training can lead to hormone declines that increase susceptibility to osteoporosis, or a frequent precursor—milder, age-related declines in bone mineral density known as osteopenia.

While it's primarily associated with women, studies show that male endurance athletes of any age may experience testosterone deficits that make them prone to the disease. Maintain healthy testosterone levels by getting enough calcium and calories for your activity level. While the RDA is 1000 mg per day for adults, athletes should aim for between 1000 and 1500 mg, says Roberta Anding, RD, a nutritionist at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. "Milk, yogurt and cheese are top calcium sources," says Anding. But if dairy is not your thing, fortified juices, tofu and cereals are another way to get your calcium quota.

Get Your Bs

As you age, you produce less stomach acid, making the absorption of certain vitamins, particularly vitamin B12, more difficult. Known to play an essential role in energy production, B12 is also integral in maintaining a healthy nervous system and forming red blood cells. Sandon recommends beef, salmon, eggs and dairy products as the best sources of B12, and suggests that people over 50 and vegetarians take B12 supplements.

Fight Inflammation With Omega-3s

"Omega-3 fatty acids help to reduce inflammation," says Gidus. That's great news for runners, who are frequently exposed to exercise-induced inflammation. Omega-3-rich foods reduce post-run joint tenderness, asthma symptoms and stiffness. Ironman triathlete Joseph Maroon, MD, a neurosurgeon at the University of Pittsburgh, concluded from several clinical studies that omega-3s are as effective as prescription medication in relieving arthritic pain.

"Fatty fishes like herring and salmon are the best sources," says Gidus. "If you can't fit that in your diet, look for a supplement from fish (preferable) or flax-seed oil."

This article appeared in Trail Runner Magazine

Wendy McMillan is a runner and writer living in Boulder, Colorado.

