

Eight Last Minute Nutrition Tips for Soccer Players

By: Nancy Clark, MS, RD

"I'm in a three-day soccer tournament. I need food help!!"

"This weekend, we're playing in the semi finals. What should I eat the day before?"

If you have looming in the near future an endurance event—such as a soccer match that will tax your endurance, you may be concerned about the best nutritional preparations. The good news is, even if your training is over, you can still significantly enhance your performance with winning food strategies.

Without a doubt, what you eat and drink during the last few days and hours before exhaustive exercise makes a difference. By eating wisely and well, you can enjoy lasting energy without hitting the wall! Here are eight last minute nutrition tips for enhancing endurance.

1. Carbo-load, don't fat-load.

Carbohydrate-rich foods include cereals, fruits, juices, breads, rice, plain baked potatoes and pasta with tomato sauce. Lower carbohydrate choices include donuts, cookies, buttery potatoes, ice cream, cheesy lasagna and pepperoni pizza. These fat-laden foods may taste great and fill your stomach but fat does not get stored as muscle fuel.

2. No last minute hard training.

By resting your muscles and doing very little exercise this pre-event week, your muscles will have the time they need to store the carbohydrates and become fully saturated with glycogen (carbohydrate). You can only fully carbo-load if you stop exercising hard! You can tell if your muscles are well carbo-loaded if you have gained 2 to 4 pounds pre-event. Your muscles store three ounces of water along with each ounce of carbohydrate. (This water will be released during the event and be put to good use.)

3. No last minute dieting.

You can't fully carbo-load your muscles if you are dieting and restricting your calories. You will have greater stamina and endurance if you are well fueled, as compared to the dieter who may be a few pounds lighter but has muscles that are suboptimally carbo-loaded. Remember: you are supposed to gain (water) weight pre-event!

4. Drink extra fluids.

You can tell if you are drinking enough fluids by monitoring your urine. You should be urinating frequently (every 2 to 4 hours); the urine should be clear colored and significant

in volume. Juices are a good fluid choice because they provide not only water and carbohydrates but also nutritional value. Save the sports drinks for during the event.

5. Eat tried-and-true foods.

If you drastically change your food choices (such as carbo-load by eating several extra bananas), you may end up with intestinal distress. Simply eat a comfortable portion of the tried-and-true carbohydrates you've enjoyed during training. You need not stuff yourself! If you will be traveling to a far away event, plan ahead so you can maintain a familiar eating schedule despite a crazy travel schedule.

6. Eat a moderate amount of fiber.

If you stuff yourself with lots of white bread, bagels, crackers, pasta and other foods made with refined white flour, you may end up constipated. Include enough fiber to promote regular bowel movements—but not too much fiber or you'll have the opposite problem! Moderate amounts of whole wheat bread, bran cereal, fruits and vegetables are generally good choices. (If you are concerned about diarrhea, limit your intake of high fiber foods and instead consume more of the refined breads and pastas.)

7. Eat the morning of the endurance event.

You'll need this fuel to maintain a normal blood sugar level. Although your muscles are well stocked from the foods you've eaten the past few days, your brain gets fuel only from the limited amount of sugar in your blood. When you nervously toss and turn the night before the event, you can deplete your blood sugar and, unless you eat carbs, you will start the event with low blood sugar. Your performance will go downhill from there...

Plan to replace the energy lost during the (sleepless) night with a light to moderate breakfast as tolerated. This will help you avoid hitting the wall. Stick with tried-and-true pre-exercise foods: cereal, bagels, toast, fruit, energy bars and/or juice. These carb-based foods invest in fueling the brain, as well as staving off hunger. If a pre-event breakfast will likely upset your system, eat extra food the night before. That is, eat your breakfast at 10:00 pm.

8. Consume carbs during the event.

During endurance exercise, you'll have greater stamina if you consume not only water, but also some carbohydrates, such as sports drinks, gels, bananas or dried fruit. You should target about 100 to 250 calories/hour after the first hour to avoid hitting the wall (For example, that's 16 to 32 ounces sports drink/hour.) Some players boost their energy intake by drinking diluted juices or defizzed cola; others suck on hard candies or eat chunks of energy bar, animal crackers and other easily chewed and digested foods along the way. Your muscles welcome this food; it gets digested and used for fuel during the

event. And hopefully, you will have experimented during training to learn what settles best...

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