

Pre-Match Meals/Snacks

Q. I have been on a low carbohydrate diet for an extended period of time and I have been successful with weight loss. I am a 3.5 level singles player. At times I feel that I don't have the proper nutrition before a match. What would be a proper pre-match meal or snack that wouldn't violate my diet, or do I just need to abandon my diet for the day of my match?

A. In general, low carbohydrate diets are not recommended for athletes who are looking to optimize their performance in the athletic arena - this includes tennis players.

The reason is that muscles (and the brain) rely on glucose for fuel, and glucose comes from carbohydrates - in fact, in working with high performance players, we recommended that carbohydrates make up 55-65% of the player's diet.

So, to eliminate carbohydrates, or significantly reduce them, is depriving your muscles of their primary fuel source. This is something that is not just important on the day of competition.

Nutrition is a long-term commitment and if you feel your nutrition is poor on the day of competition, it is likely the result of the "accumulated effect" of not having enough energy in your tank on a day-in-day-out basis.

Q. My 17-year-old son plays tennis on the school team as well as USTA Jr. tennis. He is somewhat picky about his food, unfortunately. What are some simple foods that he can put in his bag to carry him through a long day when he may have to play 3 matches in Texas heat? He alternates Gatorade and water- is this a good hydration practice?

A. As a picky eater, please remember that it takes at least 10-15 tries for the body to adjust to a food that may not be pleasing. The palate can adjust to these new flavors over time.

As for snacks that your son can eat during the course of a day with three matches here are some examples of "Shacks on the Go."

Bars: Gatorade Bars, Power Bars, Clif Bars (stay away from bars that taste similar to candy bars—too much of the wrong type of fat!)

Liquid Meals: Gatorade Shakes, Smoothies made with fresh fruit

Salted Snacks: Pretzels, low fat crackers, salted nuts or trail mix

Fresh Fruit: Bananas, Mangos, Pears, Oranges

Fresh Breads: Bagels, French Bread, Sourdough Bread

Keep the foods simple and never try something new on the day of the tournament!

A great book with good suggestions on this topic is The Official Snack Guide for Beleaguered Sports Parents. You can get this book at www.sn2g.com

Finally, alternating Gatorade and water is a great way to stay hydrated!

Q. Why are pro players provided with bananas during their matches? Is this to prevent cramping? Would the potassium from the bananas not take a long time to be absorbed into their systems? Plus they are 'heavy' in the stomach. Are there not any better sources of potassium and high energy foods that are easier absorbed?

A. You are right! Bananas are not the ideal food for preventing cramping. Actually potassium is not the culprit when it comes to preventing heat cramps at all. Heat cramps are usually caused by deficiencies of another electrolyte - SODIUM – combined with poor hydration techniques. There are some athletes who consume a lot of fluid but still cramp up. If this happens to you, you likely need to turn towards foods and beverages that have more sodium (salt) in them, not potassium. Salted pretzels, Gatorade, Endurance Gatorade, and V8 Juice are examples of products that have a higher sodium content, absorb quickly and leave your stomach feeling light. Proper hydration and electrolyte replacement are very important to sports performance.

On a side note, while bananas do contain a lot of sodium, they do have carbohydrates that help fuel your muscles!

Q. My son plays in the Junior circuit, boys 14's singles. He often plays a tournament match in the morning and then another tournament match in the afternoon. What do you recommend he eats after his first match and how long before his second match? What activities do you recommend when we are away from home but have 3 to 4 hours before his next match?

A. The two areas he must emphasize after a match are

1. Replacing any fluids lost during the match and
2. Replacing the carbohydrates/ energy stores he used up.

The best way to know how much fluid to drink is for your son to weigh himself before and after the match. He needs to drink 20-24 oz of water per pound of weight lost. To replace the lost carbohydrates he will need at least 2-3 servings of a grain (carbohydrates), some low fat dairy products and/or fruit within 30 minutes after the match. Follow this up with a light meal that contains at least 2-3oz very lean protein, 2 servings of a grain, and 1 serving of a fruit within the next 1 1/2 hours. As you get closer to the next match make sure he continues to stay hydrated. He may also need a small snack that is high in carbohydrates and very low in fat within 30 minutes to an hour of the next match, something like pretzels. Also remember that every athlete is different and the above suggestions may need to be adjusted slightly for your son.

Q. I am a diabetic. I control my blood sugar level through diet and exercise. I avoid foods that have sugar or simple carbohydrates. I typically rely on protein for energy. What recommendations do you have?

Q. I read about having a high carbohydrate diet for maintaining effectiveness on the tennis court. As a diabetic I have been encouraged in having a low carbohydrate diet to maintain my blood sugar level at around 100-120. However I have noticed that during my matches I feel like I am hitting a brick wall and do not have the energy to close out the close points or close matches. Any tips would be appreciated.

A. A well-balanced diet, containing adequate fibrous complex carbohydrates such as wheat bread, brown rice, potatoes, and other starchy vegetables like corn, peas, beans, etc., is important for providing a tennis player with the muscle energy needed during play.

Despite popular fad diet approaches suggesting limited carbohydrate intake, a diet adequate in complex carbohydrates is still crucial, even for diabetic athletes. The key is to consume foods that are quickly broken down into simple sugars at the same time you eat other slower absorbing nutrients, such as protein and dietary fat. It is still advisable to limit simple sugar “snacks” between meals, but consuming naturally occurring sugars, like those found in fruit or dairy products, along with other complex carbohydrates and lean proteins is an appropriate dietary approach for diabetic athletes. For example, an appropriate diabetic pre-match choice would be eating an apple with yogurt and peanut butter crackers.

Q. How much, what and when should I eat before a big match?

A. Pre-match dietary choices should be higher in complex carbohydrates, moderate in protein, and low in dietary fat to allow quick digestion and absorption out of the stomach. The more time you have before a match, the larger the meal that can be tolerated. For example, if you have 3 – 4 hours before you play, a normal sized sandwich like a turkey sub would be appropriate, even with a fruit and/or dairy side. No matter how much time you have before your match, try to pre-hydrate with several cups of fluids like water, sports drinks, or decaffeinated beverages. If you only have 1 – 2 hours before matches, the volume, protein, and fat content of the meal will need to be limited. An appropriate choice with this timing limitation might be 2 tbsp of peanut butter on a bagel or a PowerBar with a piece of fruit.

Q. Your pre-match routine calls for complex carbohydrates with a little protein, which could be turkey or chicken. I understand an element in turkey tends to put you asleep and I have first experience that turkey slows me down during a match. Chicken is OK but why are you suggesting turkey before a match??

A. Tryptophan is the amino acid often deemed to cause the “sleepy” side effect after consuming turkey. However, most turkey sandwiches are made with processed lean turkey products that are lower in tryptophan than the typical “whole turkey” you eat on Thanksgiving Day. The amount of tryptophan in a standard size turkey sandwich (3 ounce meat portion) should not impair your tennis performance. A well balanced meal that includes a turkey sandwich on whole grain bread, a low-fat dairy product and a piece of fruit should not cause any more drowsiness than a lean ham or chicken sandwich.

Q. Why are pro players provided with bananas during their matches? Would the potassium from the bananas not take a long time to be absorbed into their systems? Plus, bananas are 'heavy' in the stomach. Are there not any better sources of potassium and high energy foods that are more easily absorbed?

A. A more appropriate question would be “Should players consume bananas during matches?” Bananas are convenient and a great source of several important nutrients. However, bananas are not a great choice for high or rapid energy during play. In fact, a banana is a much slower provider of utilizable energy compared to a number of other carbohydrate sources, such as some sport drinks and foods (e.g., sugar-based candies, glucose gels, or even white bread) that would raise the blood sugar quickly.

Moreover, potassium replenishment during play is not a priority. To maintain performance and avert muscle cramps due to sweating, water, carbohydrate, and sodium chloride (salt) are the nutrients that a player needs to focus on consuming on court.