

Sports Nutrition

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Fruit: Questions and Concerns

"I know I should eat more fruit. I just don't do it..."
"I've stopped drinking orange juice; too much sugar."
"Should I buy organically grown fruit...?"

Some athletes wisely devour lots of fruit, believing it to be among the healthiest of food choices. But other athletes mistakenly avoid fruit, seeing it as an evil source of sugar and carbs. If you are confused about the role of fruit in your sports diet, keep reading!

Should I eat less fruit to reduce my carb intake? No! Athletes need carbs to fuel their muscles. Despite popular belief, carbs are *not* fattening. (Excess *calories* are fattening.) The carbs in fruit are of two types: sugar and starch. The starch in fruit converts to sugar with ripening:

- a green banana with some yellow is 80% starch and 7% sugar.
- a mostly yellow banana is 25% starch and 65% sugar.
- a spotted and specked banana is 5% starch and 90% sugar.

The sugar in fruit is neither unhealthful nor evil. Unlike refined white sugar, fruit sugar is accompanied by a plethora of health-protective nutrients: vitamin C, folate, potassium, fiber and phytochemicals that improve healing and aid in recovery after exercise. Fruit reduces the risk of high blood pressure, cancer and constipation. You should eat more fruit, not try to stay away from it!

Are some fruits better than others? All fruits are good for your health, and some are more nutrient-dense than others. The best fruits include oranges/citrus fruits, bananas, melons, berries, kiwi, mango. When choosing fruit, look for different colors of the rainbow: red berries, orange mango, white banana, yellow pineapple, green kiwi ... each color contains different health-protective nutrients.

I've heard today's fruits have less nutritional value..?

While some studies have shown a small decline in a few of the nutrients in today's produce, the overall picture shows we have a huge abundance of many varieties of fruits from which to choose. By simply eating extra fruit, we can more than make up for any possible decline in nutritional value.

How much fruit should I eat? According to the new food pyramid (www.myfoodpyramid.gov), you should target at least two cups of fruits per day. (The old food pyramid said "four servings" but, due to confusion about serving size, the new guide of "two cups" is better defined.) You can easily hit that target at breakfast: simply enjoy cereal with banana (1 cup) + 1 cup orange juice. Voila...fruit-duty done!

Should I buy organically grown fruit? Organically grown fruits tend to have lower levels of pesticide residues than conventionally grown counterparts. Be aware some fruits have more pesticides than others (and wash all fruits very well). The safest fruits include banana, mango, papaya, kiwi and pineapple. The fruits highest in pesticides include apples, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, raspberries and strawberries. If you can afford to do

so, buy organic versions of these high-pesticide fruits. You'll have to pay more—perhaps double for strawberries.

Your best bet is to buy organic fruits in season at the local farmers' markets. By doing so, you will support your local farmers and also pay a reasonable price. Plus, it's nice to meet the people who grow your food.

How can fruit fit into my food budget? Fresh fruit can be expensive for athletes on a budget. That is, if you need 3,000 calories a day, a 300-calorie snack of apples (3 med-lg) could cost you about \$2, while 300 calories of carbs from pretzels might cost only \$0.60. Yet, fruit bargains do exist:

- *dried fruit.* 300 calories (~1/2 cup) of raisins costs about \$0.65. Dried fruits are rich in carbs, fiber and potassium.
- *canned fruit.* 300 calories of canned peaches (a 16-oz. can) might cost \$1.30. Rest assured, canned fruits retain most of their nutritional value and are known to be low in pesticides.
- *frozen berries and other fruits.* Frozen strawberries are about half the price of fresh ones—and perfect for smoothies.
- *bananas.* A veritable bargain: 300 calories for about \$0.80

If you hesitate to buy bananas because they tend to "go bad on you" before you get around to eating them, take note. You can store them in the refrigerator: the peel will turn black but the banana will stay fresh and fine. Better yet, peel ripe bananas, cut them into chunks, freeze the separate chunks on a flat tray, then store the chunks in a zip-lock bag in the freezer. Perfect for bite-size, ice-cream-like snacks or smoothies.

How can I get myself to eat more fruit? For many athletes, breakfast is an appealing time to enjoy fruit; cereal topped with banana is an obvious choice.

- With snacks, some athletes fail to choose fruit because it's "not enough." That is, when you are hungry, 100 calories of an apple doesn't satisfy the appetite. The solution is to enjoy protein-fruit combinations: apple + (lowfat) cheese, banana + peanut butter, raisins + nuts.
- Think smoothies: Blenderize 1/2 cup of milk or juice, a banana (frozen chunks for a thick and frosty texture), (frozen) strawberries or whatever fruit is around, plus peanut butter, dry milk (for protein), graham crackers, cinnamon, vanilla ... be creative!
- If you like to keep snacks that don't spoil, check out the new Tropicana FruitWise bars made from 99% fruit. Handy!
- For a post-exercise refresher, cut up a juicy, potassium-rich orange—far healthier than an orange-flavored sports drink.
- Serve orange sections at your child's soccer game. Today's kids—as well as adults—need to be brought back to fruit.

Sports dietitian Nancy Clark MS, RD counsels casual and competitive athletes at her private practice at Healthworks (617-383-6100), the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill MA. Her *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* offers more information about fruit and healthy eating for active people. It is available via www.nancyclarkrd.com or by sending \$23 to PO Box 650124, W Newton MA 02465.

