

# SportsNutrition

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## The Athlete's Kitchen

If you are confused by the plethora of nutrition information that filters into the media, please look to the American Dietetic Association (ADA; [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)) as a trusted resource for answers to your questions. The following article highlights some topics of interest to active people; the information was presented at ADA's 2008 convention.

**Protein:** In all tissues and organs in your body, protein is "turned over" continually, meaning that old protein is broken down and replaced by new protein. Hence, we need to eat adequate protein on a daily basis to maintain health, particularly the health of the skin, liver, brain and heart. If you fail to eat enough protein (as can happen with a sub-optimal vegetarian diet, a very low calorie reducing diet, too many meatless pasta meals), you'll break down your muscles (a reservoir of protein) to protect those organs.

The maximal effective dose of protein to build new muscle is ~35 grams of high quality protein (milk, egg, fish, meats) at one time. While most athletes easily eat this amount—plus more—three times a day, elderly folks may not. Hence, they become weak and frail. *The bottom line:* Be sure you (and your parents and grandparents) maintain your health and vitality by enjoying protein with each meal!

**Eggs and eyes:** Carrots have long been touted as "good for your eyes"; they are a rich source of carotenoids (precursors of vitamin A, needed for optimal eye function). Less well known is egg yolks are also powerful eye-health protectors. The yolk is a rich source of two potent carotenoids, lutein and zeaxanthin. These antioxidants reduce by up to 40% the risk of macular degeneration, the leading cause in Americans of irreversible blindness that occurs with age.

While yellow/orange fruits and vegetables (carrots, corn, squash, orange peppers) and dark leafy greens (spinach, kale, collards) are also good sources of lutein and zeaxanthin, studies suggest egg yolks are an even better source. That's in part because the yolk contains fat, and fat helps carotenoids to be absorbed. (This means you also should enjoy olive oil with salads, rather than fat-free dressing.)

Unfortunately, in their cholesterol-consciousness, many athletes are tossing egg yolks and eating only the whites. Stop! You can healthfully enjoy the whole egg—*without elevating your blood cholesterol*. In numerous studies where the subjects consumed multiple eggs yolks, blood cholesterol stayed the same. *The bottom line:* Please make that omelet with whole eggs, orange peppers and spinach!

**Organic foods—*are they better?*** Many athletes debate whether or not they should buy organic foods. In terms of nutritional value, studies in the US suggest no significant differences, but studies in Europe report higher amounts of nutrients, including antioxidants. Eating a larger portion of conventionally grown produce can resolve any differences.

The bigger issue relates to protecting the soil and limiting water pollution from pesticides and fertilizers that seep into the ground. For those reasons, buying organic produce is a smart choice, particularly if it is locally grown, uses less fuel to be transported, and supports local farmers.

If you debate whether or not to buy organic milk, note that

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"organic" refers to farming practices, not to the milk itself. According to the research presented by Gary Rogers, PhD, there is no difference between organic and conventional milk in terms of nutrition, antibiotics and hormone content. Strict government guidelines ensure that both organic and conventional milk are safe and nutritious.

- All milk that enters dairy processors gets tested for antibiotics, to be sure they are kept out of the food supply. (Less than 1 tanker in 1,000 tests positive for any drug, including antibiotics. Any tainted milk gets tossed.)

- The hormone bST that helps cows produce more milk has been extensively studied. Results indicate no difference in milk from cows given bST and those who did not get any.

- Pesticides are also not a concern; milk ranks among the lowest of all agricultural products in detectable residues. (Extremely low levels of pesticides can be found in all foods, both organic and conventional, because pesticides are found in all water and soil.)

- One "problem" is organic milk often gets transported for long distances to areas where local organic dairy farms are not found. *The bottom line:* Buy milk from local farmers.

**Simple strategy for eating better** If you want to improve your diet, think about one thing you could do each day to contribute to a healthier intake. Write down your goal for the day, then assess your level of confidence in achieving that goal. For example, your goal might be to eat fruit with lunch. If you are very confident you can do that, go for it. But if you are not at all confident, you want to look at the barriers, and perhaps figure out another way to boost your fruit intake. Banana on cereal for breakfast? Fruit smoothie for a post-exercise recovery drink? Set yourself up for success, by developing sustainable eating habits rather than dietary "shoulds" that repeatedly fail.

**Nutrition myths:** Atlanta sports dietitian Chris Rosenbloom addressed the following common nutrition myths:

- *Is protein is the most important nutrient for athletes?* No; the best sports diet offers a foundation of carbs (for fuel) and an accompaniment of protein (for building muscles).

- *Are whole grains always healthier than refined grains?* No. Enriched refined grains are a good source of iron, to prevent anemia, as well as folic acid, to reduce a woman's risk of having a baby with birth defects

- *Does drinking extra water help you lose weight?* No, but eating watery foods (soup) can help reduce total calories.

- *The less fat you eat, the better?* No. The type of fat is the issue. A diet with monounsaturated fat (olive oil) reduces the risk of diabetes and heart disease. The fat also enhances absorption of health-protective vitamins A, D, E and K.

**Want food help?** The best dietary advice comes with a one-on-one consultation with a sports dietitian. To find your local expert, use the referral network at [www.SCANDpg.org](http://www.SCANDpg.org).

Nancy Clark MS, RD counsels casual exercisers and competitive athletes at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill, MA (617-383-6100). Her **NEW 2008** *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook 4th Edition*, and her *Food Guide for Marathoners and Cyclist's Food Guide* are available via [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com).