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Introduction

The myth of using diets to enhance endurance performance and what you should do instead

A while back I got a question about nutrition for triathletes:

"What sort of diet supports and enhances athletic endurance in triathlon?"

A common question, but one that often leads to all sorts of misconceptions and incorrect conclusions. In this case, the question itself is biased towards the idea that you need to be on a diet to optimize nutrition.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

While there are case studies of athletes doing really well on specific diets like paleo or vegan, the very large majority of elite athletes are not on any sort of diet. BUT - they eat extremely well.

In this quick-guide we'll cover the most important nutritional concepts for any endurance athlete to understand.

By reading this guide you'll get actionable advice on how to optimize your nutrition without going on a diet.

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to email me at mikael@scientifictriathlon.com

Mikael Eriksson
Improve your food quality

This is pretty self-explanatory. You probably already know of a few changes that you could easily make to what you eat and it would instantly improve your nutrition quality. These are simple changes like swapping white rice for brown rice, stop adding sugar to your coffee, stop frying everything, and so on.

Matt Fitzgerald invented a simple system for scoring your food quality in his book "Racing Weight". The list of food categories on the right, in order of quality, is from that book. You have to get the book for the complete scoring system, but you can make a simplified version yourself based on this list of ten food categories.

- Count the number of servings you have during a day in each category. You can define a serving yourself, but for example, a banana is one serving of fruit, a sandwich with lettuce, tomatoes and a small piece of chicken is one serving of refined grains and half a serving each of lean meats and vegetables.

- Your task is to increase the amount of high-quality foods you eat, and decrease the amount of low-quality foods, based on the list. Track your food quality this way over a period of time, and watch the trend. The awareness this gives you will help you improve your food quality.
When you eat matters, as does what macronutrients you eat when.

Follow the following principles and you're off to a great start:

- **Eat early**
  Most athletes eat too much too late. Try to front-load your eating and increase the size of your breakfast.

- **Eat often**
  You’ve probably heard this before, but snacking is really useful for keeping energy levels and blood sugar levels stable throughout the day, and to prevent overeating at your main meals.

- **Eat before exercise**
  Have a meal containing at least 100 g of carbs no more than 4 h before exercise

- **Fuel during exercise**
  For sessions lasting 90 minutes or longer, fuel with 30 g to 60 g of carbs per hour. The rate of fuelling will depend on just how depleted the session will get you (both duration and intensity matter) and how much mid-exercise nutrition intake you can handle.

- **Eat after exercise**
  Aim to consume roughly 0.23 g of carbohydrate per kilogram of bodyweight (0.5 g per pound) within 90 minutes of exercise, and around 1 g of proteins per 4 g of carbohydrates.
Many diets prescribe a limited carbohydrate intake. However, as a triathlete, if you want optimal performance in training and racing, chances are that you are not eating enough carbs, rather than too much.

For example, the average Western diet contains way fewer carbs than what's recommended for endurance athletes but is high in fats (generally unhealthy) and proteins instead.

The charts below shows you what range of carbohydrates you should aim for, based on your weekly training hours.
How should you use these charts in practice?

There's certainly no need to start weighing your carbs. What I suggest is that during one normal training day you do actually pay special attention to everything you eat. Write it down in a journal for example.

Then use a tool like Calorie King or MyFitnessPal (my personal favorite) to calculate how many grams of carbs you got during the day, divide that by your bodyweight (in lbs or kg), and check whether you're in the right range for your amount of training.

If you are, then great! You now have a ballpark reference for how much carbs you need.
If not, then adjust up or down as necessary, and redo this test after you have adjusted. Keep doing this until you get into the right range.

Once you have the amount of carbs you should eat figured out, the rest is pretty simple, and the margins for error are large enough that you don't need to worry too much about it. For the rest of your daily energy intake, aim for

- Half to two-thirds of the rest of your calories should come from (mostly healthy) fats.
- One-third to half of the rest of your calories should come from proteins.
The final piece of the triathlon nutrition puzzle is establishing some good habits around your nutrition, mindset, and self-awareness.

This is a very broad topic, so rather than going into any specific details, I'll just briefly list a few key points that I think are particularly important.

- **Make healthy eating as convenient as possible.**
  This means having healthy food and snacks available when you need it. Stock your kitchen, keep a healthy snack with you just in case, etc.

- **Make unhealthy eating more inconvenient.**
  A great starting point is to just not keep any stock of junk food in your kitchen. When you’re occasionally in the mood for ice-cream or cake, go and buy it and consume it the same day, but don't keep a stock of these things at home.

- **Avoid "just this once" thinking.**
  It's very easy to delude yourself into thinking things like "I'll make an exception today and have a donut since my coworker brought them to the office and it's her birthday".

  Become aware of the fact that for most of us, these "just this once" opportunities happen way too regularly, and it will become much easier to start saying no to at least some of them.

- **Don't go extreme.**
  Treat yourself to ice-cream, a pizza or some other unhealthy food that you enjoy every one in a while! If you go extreme on healthy eating it’s easy to become unhappy or to have setbacks in the form of extreme binging, since you're constantly in a state of mental resistance.
80% eat to train, 20% train to eat.
To keep a good balance for optimal performance, you can use the 80/20 rule. 80% of the time, keep an "eat to train" mindset, where you eat for optimal performance, as per the previous tips in this guide. 20% of the time, however, you can have a "train to eat" mindset, to keep you happy and sane :)

Long ride days are good days to have a dessert after dinner for example. Not only because you burn so many calories during the ride anyway, but you can use the prospect of that chocolate cake with cream as motivation during the final stages of your ride, and help you get through those rough patches!

Take notes of what works.
If you have a training log, add small notes about your nutrition to it as well. That way, you can start seeing patterns in what works for you and what doesn't.

Had an exceptional training session today? Go back and see whether that might be because you fuelled exceptionally well post-workout yesterday, so your recovery is better. If you don't have a training log, time to start one!
Improve your food quality

Make simple changes to improve your food quality. Score your food quality and track changes over time. Examples:

- Brown instead of white rice
- Oatmeal instead of sugary cereal
- Dark chocolate as dessert instead of ice cream

Nutrition timing

- Eat early
- Eat often
- Eat before exercise
- Fuel during exercise
- Eat after exercise

Nutrient balance

- Use the charts in the book to find out how many carbs you need.
- Half to two-thirds of the rest of your calories should come from fats.
- One-third to half of the rest of your calories should come from proteins.

Nutrition habits

- Make healthy eating as convenient as possible.
- Make unhealthy eating more inconvenient.
- Avoid "just this once" thinking.
- Don't go extreme.
- 80% eat to train, 20% train to eat.
Questions and comments

Was anything unclear? Do you want more information on some related topic? Do you have comments or feedback?

Then email me! I read and reply to every single email I get from readers. Just click below!

SEND QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS