ARE YOU FUELING RIGHT?

The food and drink you consume before, during, and after a workout will help you feel great and perform your best. Do you know what you need? Time to find out!

BY LAURA WALLIS

True or false:
High-fat foods and workouts don't mix.

Partially true. Fat takes a long time to move out of the stomach, so high-fat foods can make you feel full and uncomfortable if you eat them too close to a workout. "And for some, fats can cause GI distress—nausea, acid reflux—during exercise," says Yasi Ansari, MS, RD, a national media spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Plus, "that feeling of fullness can make it difficult to hydrate properly," says Dan Benardot, PhD, RD, professor of practice at the Center for the Study of Human Health, Emory University. "And even moderate dehydration compromises the benefit of exercise." So stick with a low-fat meal pre-workout.

That's not to say you can't benefit from healthy fats—just save them for after. "The body is like a sponge after training," Ansari says. "You want it to soak in as many nutrients as possible. I recommend heart-healthy fats like monounsaturated and omega-3 fatty acid sources, such as nuts, avocados, and fatty fish."

True or false:
For an athlete, good nutrition is all about protein.

False. Ever eat a meal or snack of mostly protein, then later go for a long run and wonder where your energy was? That dead-legs feeling can be avoided by adding in some carbs. "Protein is best for building and repairing muscles, but carbohydrates—bread, grains, fruits, vegetables—are what fuels the brain and muscles," explains Nancy Clark, MS, RD, a sports nutrition counselor and author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*. "A lot of people will have a spoonful of peanut butter before a workout, or a protein bar. But they should be having a banana with that, or some bread."

After a workout, when your body is in recovery mode, you want a balance of carbohydrates and protein, in a roughly 3-to-1 ratio. The carbs work to rebuild your glycogen stores, and the protein helps build and repair muscles. You can get the combo from a glass of chocolate milk, a bowl of cereal with milk, or some chicken with rice.

True or false:
I need recovery food, even if I'm trying to lose weight.

True. Right after a workout, your appetite might be suppressed and you might be tempted to skip the meal to save on calories, says

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Clark. But that can backfire. "A couple of hours later, you might be starving and overindulge," she says. Head that off by eating sooner, ideally within 20 to 30 minutes after your workout. This, Benardot points out, also happens to be the window of time when your body can best convert the carbs you eat into fuel (as opposed to into fat).

If you're a recreational exerciser watching your weight and calories, you don't necessarily need to add extra calories to your diet to have a recovery meal. It's all about timing. "I back my workout into meals," says Clark. "I might have part of my breakfast, say, a banana, before a run, then come back and have cereal, milk, nuts, more fruit—the rest of my meal."

True or false:
If I'm not thirsty, I'm well hydrated.

False. "Thirst is an emergency sensation," says Benardot. "If you feel it, you've waited too long." Which means you're already somewhat dehydrated. Avoid that by drinking plenty of water throughout the day—enough that your urine is clear or very pale in color—and sipping a beverage every 10 minutes or so as you work out.

Cramping during exercise is another sign of dehydration, as is losing weight over the course of a workout. "Weigh yourself before and after exercise," says Ansari. "If your weight is pretty stable, you've adequately hydrated. If it's gone down, you've lost fluids. Rehydrate with two to three cups of water [or a sports beverage] for every pound lost."

True or false:
It's fine to work out first and fuel up later.

False. It's a common training habit to get up in the morning and go run or work out, then eat afterward. "But it's a big mistake," says Benardot. "If you work out when your blood sugar is low, you end up breaking down the muscles you're trying to train. You'll never really improve as much as you might if you ate a little something first so your blood sugar is normal."

The quick science behind this is that your body and brain need fuel from food to function. When carbohydrates are broken down into glucose (an important source of energy and the brain's primary source), it can be used immediately, stored in the liver and muscles (as glycogen), or stored as fat. In glycogen's absence, the body releases cortisol, a stress hormone, which breaks down muscle and bone instead. So your brain gets the energy it needs, but your muscles pay the price.

If your goal is to get stronger, eat first, ideally an hour or so before your workout; a 200-calorie snack will do the job.

True or false:
When adding carbs, high-fiber complex carbs are best.

Sometimes true. Complex carbs (for example, whole-grain bread or oatmeal) are generally the superior choice for your overall health due to their high fiber content, but for pre-workout fuel, lower-fiber simple carbs (white bread, granola bars, bananas) are easier to break down for energy. Like fat, fiber can take a while to digest, and that can make for an uncomfortable workout. "If you have enough time to break it down, I generally recommend higher-fiber carbs," says Ansari. "But within an hour or so of exercise, a snack higher in simple sugars—fast-acting carbs—may be a better choice."

Benardot agrees, noting that "there's a huge variation between individuals when it comes to fiber tolerance." He adds that even if you do well with higher-fiber carbs before a workout, it's probably better to stick with natural foods and avoid processed ones made with added fiber.

True or false:
Sports beverages are for serious athletes and kids' soccer teams.

It depends. Over the course of a normal day—or during a light or short workout—water is better than sports drinks, which are enhanced with electrolytes (essential minerals that help regulate fluids and muscle contractions) and sugar. "Drinking one when not exercising isn't good for insulin levels," says Benardot. "And those refined carbs will end up being turned to fat."

But when exercising for longer than 30 minutes, you should have a sports beverage, he says. Though you don't want too much at once—think sipping, not chugging—these beverages are designed to counteract the rapid drop of sugar, salt, and water through your workout. "If you have one or two mouthfuls every 10 minutes or so, virtually all the sugar will be used by the brain and muscle tissues, and you'll have better performance," Benardot says.

True or false:
My new running routine means I've earned my couch-and-pizza time.

Mostly false. Be careful about overestimating your calorie burn—a three-mile run only burns about 300 calories, for example. Another factor to consider, Clark says, is sedentary athlete syndrome: If you work out, then sit around the rest of the day, it may metabolically erase the benefits from the exercise. "People just need to be aware that their 24-hour activity level counts. One hour at the gym does not compensate for 23 hours of [being] sedentary." All the little active moments in your day—walking instead of driving to do an errand, standing up at your desk, folding laundry while watching TV instead of lounging—contribute to your overall good health.