

eating GONE WRONG

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"ALEXIS, I'M FEELING KIND OF SLUGGISH LATELY. DO YOU THINK IT COULD HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH MY DIET? IF I ATE BETTER, COULD I IMPROVE MY TIMES? I WONDER HOW MUCH MY DIET AFFECTS MY PERFORMANCE?"

I'm a dietitian and when I run with my running club, people get curious about my nutrition knowledge and ask me questions like this. I counsel runners and athletes and am also one myself, so I can speak from experience. Nutrition is a hot topic these days and runners are starting to recognize nutrition as a key component of their training, just like putting in the mileage. Despite this increased awareness, many runners neglect eating properly. They usually fall into one of two categories: the under-eater and the over-eater.

The under-eater is usually the thinner runner who trains at high mileage. If this sounds like you, it's worth looking at why you under-eat. It may be simply because you aren't aware of what your body needs, or don't have the appetite to consume enough food. Alternatively, a runner who uses excessive exercise and food restriction as a means to achieve or maintain an unhealthy low body weight may have

an eating disorder. This is a psychologically-based problem that a health care team can help with.

A typical diet for a runner who under eats could be a bowl of cereal for breakfast, a salad with some crackers for lunch, an apple mid afternoon and a dinner of fish, rice and veggies. Sounds very healthy, but for a distance runner this is clearly not enough food. The problem with under-eating is that the body is constantly being starved for calories and tends to break down muscle instead of building it. In starvation, the body also becomes more efficient at burning the few calories you give it. This is a dangerous thing if the runner ever splurges or overeats because they will tend to not burn off the extra calories and may gain undesirable body fat during holidays or times when training levels aren't as high. Some more serious complications of under-eating include iron deficiency and reduced bone density leading to osteoporosis, as well as burnout and fatigue.

The over-eating runner is quite the opposite. They may run a little or a lot and think that this is a ticket to eat (and drink) whatever they want. They figure "Hey, I'm a runner, I deserve that extra beer (or piece of pie,

chocolate, etc). The problem with over-eating is that you tend to store extra body fat, which makes you slower and more sluggish. The more serious complications of eating too much of the wrong foods are related to the development of things like high cholesterol and diabetes. If you constantly overeat, you'll also have a tendency to be heavier, which puts you at risk for obesity-related diseases as well as joint injuries. While running is a great way to burn calories, you still need a healthy and well-balanced diet to get the best health benefits from the sport.

Okay, so you may have identified that you fall into one of these two patterns, but what can you do? Read the Simple Solutions section if you want to keep this relatively easy and number-free. If you're more technical, I've provided the Technical Approach about how much food you need to eat.

Now that you know how much to eat, follow these tips to help you achieve your eating and weight goals.

For weight loss (the over-eater):

- Reduce your caloric intake by 300-500 calories. If you go lower than 500 calories below your calculated

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS:

·Write down what you eat for a few days. If you're trying to eat less, cut out 300–500 calories per day (such as that second helping of mashed potatoes and meat). If you're trying to gain weight, add one or two extra snacks, perhaps a mid-morning or second mid-afternoon snack of 1/2 cup almonds and a banana.

·Eat every 3–4 hours. Plan out meals and snacks and make sure you have healthy options available to avoid running to the vending machine or drive-through.

·Have some protein, carbs and healthy fats at every meal, e.g., breakfast of cereal with milk and two tablespoons of nuts.

·Include protein with snacks to keep you feeling full longer and balance blood sugars. Protein comes from meats, fish, poultry and meat alternatives like beans and nuts. Dairy products are also a great source of protein, calcium and other nutrients, so include low-fat milk, cottage cheese and yogurts.

THE TECHNICAL APPROACH:

1. Calculate your Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) with this equation:

Women: $BMR = 655 + (4.35 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (4.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $BMR = 66 + (6.23 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (12.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in year})$

Your BMR is the amount of calories you need to consume if you do absolutely nothing but lay in bed all day. This equation tends to overestimate calorie needs for someone who is overweight so it may be worth using a weight that is halfway between your actual weight and your realistic goal weight (e.g., if you weigh 200 lbs and want to weigh 150, use 175 lbs in the equation above).

2. Multiply by an activity factor based on your exercise level:

Sedentary (little or no exercise): $BMR \times 1.2$

Lightly active (light exercise/sports 1–3 days/week): $BMR \times 1.375$

Moderately active (moderate exercise/sports 3–5 days/week): $BMR \times 1.55$

Very active (hard exercise/sports 6–7 days a week): $BMR \times 1.725$

Extra active (very hard exercise/sports & physical job or training 2x/day): $BMR \times 1.9$

requirement, you'll tend to feel deprived and run the risk of slowing down your metabolism. Remember, this is meant to be a long-term change, not a quick dieting fix.

- Keep a food diary. I know it's a pain but from experience, my clients who do this are the most successful. Research backs this belief up, as it shows that those who record their intake daily as a form of self-monitoring are more successful at losing, and more importantly, at maintaining their weight loss.

- Try to get 50–60% of your calories from carbs, 20–30% from fat and 20–30% from protein. A bit of extra protein will help keep you full when cutting calories. You want to make sure you don't go below 50% carbs because you won't have enough energy for your exercise. Try a website like www.fitday.com to track your calories; it automatically calculates your ratio percentages for you so you don't have to do the math.

- Limit nighttime nibbles to easily cut back on 200–300 calories per day.

- Reduce the calories from beverages (sorry, this includes alcohol). A beer is 150 calories and a 3.5 oz glass of

wine is 70 calories. Juice or other sweet drinks average about 100–150 calories per 8 oz. cup. A few drinks a day can really add up.

- Use smaller plates to cut back on portions. Fill half of your dinner plate with non-starchy veggies. Most of my clients over-consume calories from the grain and starch group. Measure out your portions of pasta and rice and buy products that are portion controlled like mini bagels and thinner sliced whole-grain breads.

- Don't deprive yourself completely. If you have a craving, get a small amount of the food. Many people find it easier to stick to a day-to-day healthy diet if they include a little treat like a small square of chocolate, a cup of cocoa or a small bowl of ice cream a few times a week. Know the trigger foods you tend to binge on and don't keep them in the house, but rather go out and get a small serving when you're really craving. Consider buying portion-controlled treats such as ice cream bars and mini chip packages.

For weight gain (the under-eater):

- Increase your caloric intake by 300–500 calories per day (going higher may make you feel sick and sluggish).

- Avoid developing bad habits as a means to gain weight. Pigging out is not the answer. Eat smaller more frequent meals and choose foods with higher caloric density (like nuts). Runners who pig out to gain weight and eat large volumes in one sitting develop the bad habit of over-eating and can run the risk of gaining undesirable weight if they have to reduce their training levels due to injury.

- Adding higher fat and protein foods may help increase calories, but make sure you don't go overboard on animal sources of protein and fat because they aren't as good for your heart. Increasing your calories from all the nutrients is a good idea and can be achieved by adding extra balanced snacks to your day.

- Try adding extra olive oil to salad dressing, non-hydrogenated margarine to vegetables, protein powder to oatmeal and snacking on nuts to increase calories.

- Make sure you eat snacks before, during and after exercise. Use quick absorbing carbs before and during exercise, and have snacks with carbs and protein afterwards to help repair muscles and replenish glycogen stores most efficiently.