



Food for Sport – The Athlete's Kitchen

Mastering Sports Nutrition: Tips for older athletes



Food for Sport by Nancy Clark
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One hundred years ago, life expectancy was 42 years. Today, most of us will live twice as long. With age, we gain not only wrinkles and gray hair, but also wisdom, an appreciation for our mortality and the desire to protect our good health. If you are a master's athlete, you also have the desire to remain competitive. You may wonder if you have significantly different sports nutrition needs from younger athletes.

To date, the research suggests older athletes have no significantly different nutritional needs other than to optimise their sports diet so they'll have every possible edge over the younger folks. Their biggest nutrition concern should be to routinely eat quality calories from nutrient-dense, health protective foods that invest in top performance, enhance recovery from hard workouts, and reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis and other debilitating diseases of aging. The following tips can help older athletes (and aging athletes, i.e., all of us) create a winning food plan that's appropriate for every sport, including the sport of living life to it's fullest! Don't end up like Mickey Mantle who once said, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself..."

Carbohydrates

Focus your meals on wholesome carbs. Multi-grain bagels, rye crackers, brown rice and oatmeal are just a few examples of wholesome grain foods that both fuel muscles and protect against cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Carb-rich bananas, orange juice, yogurt and/or smoothies also do the job. If you are now slowly recovering from workouts, remember that rapid post-exercise refuelling optimizes recovery.

Protein

As people age, their protein needs slightly increase—but not enough to have a separate protein recommendation for masters athletes. Just don't skimp on protein-rich foods. Be sure to eat protein with at least two meals per day to build, repair and protect your muscles. Peanut butter on toast, turkey sandwich on multi-grain bread and/or spaghetti with meat sauce will do the job.

Red meat, reputed to be bad for heart health, can actually be a welcome addition to a sports diet as long as it is lean. (Beef's cholesterol content is similar to that of chicken and fish.) Lean beef offers not only protein but also iron, zinc, B-vitamins and other nutrients important for athletes. Protein-rich fish—in particular salmon, swordfish, tuna and other oily fishes—offer health-protective fats that reduce the risk of heart disease, as well as cancer and the discomfort of rheumatoid arthritis. Target twelve ounces of fish per week (two to three servings).

If you prefer a vegetarian diet, enjoy generous amounts of beans, nuts and soy. Consuming a protein-rich plant food at each meal can supply adequate protein. Enjoy chopped walnuts in oatmeal, humus in a pita pocket, tofu in a stir-fry.

Fat

Healthful plant and fish oils have a health-protective anti-inflammatory effect. Given that diseases of aging, such as heart disease and diabetes, are thought to be triggered by inflammation, consuming plant and fish oils that reduce inflammation is a wise choice. (eg, people who eat peanut butter 5 or more times per week reduce their risk of heart disease by 50%.) Enjoy a little healthful fat at each meal: slivered almonds on granola, trail mix with nuts for snacks, fish with dinner, a sprinkling of olive oil on salads. Fat is not only satiating and abates hunger, but it also is an important fuel for endurance exercise.

Calcium

Even though your bones have stopped growing, they are still alive and need to be kept strong with resistance exercise and daily calcium. This advice applies to men (who plan to live older than 70 years) as well as women. By selecting a calcium-rich food at each meal (including soy or lactose-free milk products), you'll invest in bone health. This could easily be milk on cereal, yogurt with lunch, and a latte for a snack. Having strong muscles attached to the bones is also essential, so be sure to do strengthening exercises such as lifting weights at least twice a week.

Fibre

Eat enough fibre-rich foods to have regular bowel movements; this not only enhances sports comfort but also invests in good health. The fibre in oatmeal, for example, reduces cholesterol and risk of heart disease. Food richest in fibre include bran cereal, bran breads, whole grains; fruits and veggies are second-best.

Vitamins

Colourful fruits and vegetables are the best all-natural sources of vitamins. By eating a rainbow of foods (blue berries, orange carrots, red tomatoes, green beans, etc.), you consume not only lots of vitamin C, potassium and folic acid for heart health and blood pressure control but also numerous phytochemicals that are thought to be cancer protective. While there's no harm in taking a multi-vitamin pill for health insurance, the better bet is to at least have a generous amount of fruit at breakfast (banana on cereal + 8 ounces OJ) and a pile of colourful veggies at lunch and/or dinner (big salad, lots of broccoli). Also keep exercising: the more you exercise, the more you eat – and the more vitamins you consume.

Anti-oxidant vitamin supplements such as C and E are popular among masters athletes but the research has yet to support this practice. At the 2003 American College of Sports Medicine meeting, the latest research found no benefits for C or E with regard to muscle recovery. The body responds to extra exercise by making extra anti-oxidants. The body also responds with a larger appetite. The trick is to eat more vitamin-rich fruits and veggies rather than cookies and desserts. These wholesome foods offer compounds that work synergistically and are more powerful than vitamin pills.

Fluids

The older you get, the less sensitive your thirst mechanism becomes. That is, you may need fluids but may not feel thirsty. To reduce the risk of chronic hypohydration, drink enough so that you urinate every three to four hours. The urine should be a light colour; not dark and concentrated. You don't have to drink plain water; the water in fruit, yogurt, salads, soups and even coffee and iced tea counts toward your fluid requirement.

Weight

Even elite masters athletes gain a little weight with age. And non-elite folks have been known to gain a lot! Staying active – and eating quality calories that invest in staying healthy enough to keep active – is your best weight management technique.

The bottom line

Eat wisely, drink plenty of fluids, exercise regularly, lift weights, refuel rapidly and enjoy feeling young. Let wholesome food and enjoyable exercise be thy winning edge!