

Eating for Cycling

There are two separate concepts to consider. Basic Nutrition and healthy eating equals a healthier body that will avoid illness, and tolerate the stress of training better. The other concept is energy; in cycling, food is fuel, and you want to run on premium.

1. Eat a healthy diet with a wide variety of foods, and adequate carbohydrate, fat, and protein. Basic principles of Nutrition apply here. The food pyramid is a good model for cyclists. You need both carbohydrate and fats for adequate energy, and protein for building all that new muscle you are developing. Protein diets that are currently popular do not mix well with distance cycling because of the duration of the energy demand.

Cycling is aerobic. When exercising aerobically, your muscles run on a mix of fuel, part stored fats, and a kind of fuel stored in the muscle called glycogen. Your body makes glycogen from carbohydrates. You must replenish it as you ride. Use it all up, and you will bonk. Bonking means your muscles have run out of fuel. Bonking feels really bad, you feel sick, weak, and exhausted. Some people feel shaky like low blood sugar. It can come on very quickly. Your speed will slow to a crawl, and it will feel very hard to turn the crank and keep going. Your muscles feel frozen. You fix it by getting carbohydrates back in your system.

2. Drink lots of water. Hydration is fundamental. Dehydrated muscles don't work well, lose speed, strength, and have cramps. Prehydrate the day before a ride, and avoid alcohol and caffeine because they cause your body to lose water. You must have water on your bike during the ride. Drink frequently and if you feel thirsty, you are already behind on fluids, and need to drink extra. Drink after the ride too.

Hydration systems (such as Camel Baks) are widely used by our groups. They allow you to carry a lot of water, and keep your hands free for the bike while you drink. Most people find they drink a lot more from a Camel Bak than they do from water bottles. Water bottles are fine with us too. Practice drinking while riding.

3. Eat enough calories. Do not try to lose weight with extreme calorie restrictions. You can lose weight while cycling, but you need enough fuel stores before you ride, and you need to replenish them as you ride, and after you ride. Just like thirst, by the time your body signals you that you are hungry, you are behind. If you are trying to lose weight, eat smarter. Whole grains, legumes, and balanced amounts of protein and fats will help you. Simple sugars, white flours, highly processed junk foods and alcohol are lousy fuels. They may have lots of calories, but they burn up very quickly, and don't provide a lot of energy or nutrition. The less processed, usually the better fuel quality.

Good bike food: high carbohydrate value, easily portable, not too messy, and not subject to easy spoilage. Common choices are sports bars and gels, dried fruit, fresh sliced apples

and oranges, bananas, peanut butter and Jelly, and Paydays.

Sports Bars and Gels: Power Bar, power gel, cliff bars, cliff shot, GU, and dozens of others are sport specific prepackaged products that supply handy, compact, portable carbohydrates (most bars have a little fat and protein). The gels are absorbed quickly, and particularly useful if you have trouble eating while riding, or just carry one for an emergency bonk.

Sports drinks such as Gatorade, Cytomax , Endurox to name a few, provide carbohydrate, and electrolyte replacement, in particular salt. They are especially important in hot weather, but you need them for rides in the winter too. Find one you like the taste of, and agrees with your GI tract. Again, the choice is personal. Carry water separate, or dilute half strength.

If you lose too much salt through perspiration, and you dilute your blood more by drinking plain water, and you can end up seriously ill. I know two local women who have had coma and seizures from this, so in warm weather, take it seriously. Salt can also be replaced just with foods such as pretzels, chips, V8, and pickles.

If you have a salt restricted diet, please talk to your doctor.

Lastly, Breakfast: Eat something. Quantity and content is personal. Experiment. You want food that is easily digested, and good quality fuel. Some people need protein or they are more likely to bonk.

Remember on the bike: Drink before you are thirsty. Eat before you are Hungry. Always carry water and food.