



Nutritional Preparation for Tournaments and Multiple Heat Competitions

Preparing for a single event is challenging enough, but what should you do if you have to compete in a series of events? Many sporting competitions involve multiple games or a series of heats and finals in the same day, or over consecutive days. To further complicate matters, in some situations the exact start time of an event may not be known (e.g. tennis tournament) making planning even more difficult. Whatever the scenario, meeting your nutritional needs to compete at your best means you need to consider a number of key factors.

When it comes to tournaments expect the unexpected. Don't just plan for what you hope will happen, plan for the worst-case scenario. For example, in tennis the match could go for a shorter or longer duration than expected due to a player injury, rain delays or a close game that goes to an extra set. For a successful competition, planning is important but flexibility is required. If you only have limited strategies, meal times or a restricted eating pattern then there is a good chance you will be caught out.

Challenges with food timing

General advice for eating before exercise is to have a carbohydrate-rich meal or snack 2-4 hours before exercise. However, in a tournament situation this may not always be practical. The breaks between events may not be long enough for a meal or large snack to be digested. Instead a better strategy might be to have a planned "graze" throughout the day on lots of small nutritious snack foods. Individual tolerance varies however, use the following as a guide:

Time Before Exercise	Suggested Food Choices
3-4 hours	crumpets with jam or honey + flavoured milk baked potato + cottage cheese filling + glass of milk baked beans on toast breakfast cereal with milk bread roll with cheese/meat filling + banana fruit salad with fruit-flavoured yoghurt pasta or rice with a sauce based on low-fat ingredients (e.g. tomato, vegetables, lean meat)
1-2 hours	liquid meal supplement milk shake or fruit smoothie sports bars (check labels for carbohydrate and protein content) breakfast cereal with milk cereal bars fruit-flavoured yoghurt fruit
Less than 1 hour*	sports drink carbohydrate gel cordial sports bars jelly lollies





* NB. A small number of people experience an extreme reaction following the intake of carbohydrate in the hour prior to exercise. This topic is covered in the Eating Before Exercise fact sheet

In addition to these guidelines, you should consider:

- the time of day you will be competing (and don't forget to include warm up time!)
- whether foods you would normally eat at those times of the day are going to be appropriate – e.g. can you keep a yoghurt cold until mid-morning?
- whether foods normally used at particular times of the day could be used as part of your tournament plan – e.g. breakfast cereals make handy snacks

Grazing throughout the day may not satisfy your appetite as well as your usual meal plan. To avoid being hungry, plan for a larger snack or small meal at a strategic time, such as the longest expected break. Practice your competition eating strategies in training so that you can be confident of avoiding stomach upsets on the day.

Challenges with food availability

You've worked out when you are going to eat, but what are you going to choose? Typically sporting venues provide a limited selection of foods and fluids. Try to find out in advance, what will be on offer to avoid any shocks on the day. The safest option is to take your own supplies. Consider food freshness, refrigeration needs and perishability. Foods that are generally consumed cold or cooled should be kept this way. Some foods such as low-fat yoghurts and fruche may be able to be kept cold for a few hours but should be consumed early in the day. Fragile food such as sandwiches and fruit should be kept cool and in a protective container – no one likes a warm, soggy sandwich or a squashed banana! Robust food options that can be stored at environmental temperature include dry biscuits, rice cakes, tinned fruit, dried fruit, cereal bars, sports bars, fruit buns/scrolls, scones and pikelets. Cup-a-soups are a good option if you have access to boiled water.

It's always a good idea to pack a variety of foods and always pack a bit extra. You may change your mind about what you want or you may need to eat more than you expect. However, avoid eating everything in your bag, just because it is there. You can always take your surplus supplies home at the end of the day.

Flavour fatigue

Your exercising muscles aren't the only things that get tired. Your taste buds can get tired as well! Many suitable carbohydrate-rich foods are sweet tasting, however over a long day of competing "flavour fatigue" can set in. Savoury foods often become more appealing. Many savoury foods are higher in salt. This may encourage fluid intake and improve fluid absorption and retention. Therefore, plan to include some savoury foods in your tournament eating pattern. Options include sandwiches with Vegemite or peanut butter, dried biscuits, soup, low-fat 2-minute noodles and crisps.

Challenges meeting high energy requirements

Supplements such as sports bars and liquid meal supplements should be considered if you expect to have particularly high-energy requirements, limited time to refuel or if you tend to suffer from stomach upset during competition. Liquid meal supplements empty quickly from your gut, decreasing the likelihood of stomach upset. They also provide valuable nutrients such as carbohydrate and protein for refuelling and recovery between events.

If you have high-energy requirements you may also consider high-sugar carbohydrate options such as jam and honey as spreads, lollies and cordial. These will provide additional energy in the form of carbohydrate.





Challenges with hydration

You've now thought about the foods you are going to eat and when, but don't forget the vital ingredient – fluid! Preventing dehydration is a key to sustained performance, especially when competing for long periods and in multiple events over one or many days.

Tips for maintaining hydration in tournament situations include:

- Start exercise well hydrated.
- Drink plenty of fluids from the time you wake up and keep drinking to a plan all day. Steady drinking throughout the day/night will have you better prepared than drinking large amounts of fluid irregularly.
- Include carbohydrate-rich beverages such as sports drinks to continually top up carbohydrate stores and maintain fluid balance.
- “Still” beverages (e.g. sports drinks, cordial, water) may be better tolerated than fizzy drinks especially if you are required to compete at short notice.
- Always have drink bottles handy for regular fluid consumption.
- Keep fluids cool with ice (alternatively, freeze drinks the night before allowing them to defrost slowly over the day of competition).

Practical Example

School Swimming Carnival

Time	Event	Advice
700 am	Breakfast	Cereal + low fat milk + slice of toast with jam
900 am	Warm up and race 50 m freestyle heats	Drink at least 1 cup of water in the half hour before race
1000 am	Break	Fruche / banana + water or sports drink
1100 am	Warm up and race 50m backstroke	
1130 am	Recovery, warm up and race 50m freestyle final	Remember fluids – water or sports drink
1200 noon	Lunch	Vegemite / ham sandwich + tinned fruit
130 pm	Warm up and race 100m medley	Remember fluids – water or sports drink
300 pm	Break	Cereal bar + sports drink
400 pm	Warm up and race 4X50m freestyle relay	Remember fluids between races.
430 pm	Recovery, warm up and race 4X50m medley relay	Don't forget fluid replacement after racing. Sports drinks will help to replenish carbohydrate until you get home for dinner
600 pm	Dinner	Chilli chicken + rice (see the Recipe section of this website)

Summary

Preparing for a competition or tournament involves putting the basics of sports nutrition into practice. Planning ahead will help you have a successful competition and avoid food-related stresses on the day(s) of competition. Don't forget fluids as part of your plan! For individual advice contact a sports dietitian in your local area. Sports Dietitians Australia (www.sportsdietitians.com.au) can help you locate qualified sports dietitians.

