



FOUR DIETS FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

By Scott Saifer. Contact him at 925-933-7306 or ScottSaifer@wenzelcoaching.com for more information

Endurance athletes have four diets, each necessary for success and each appropriate for a certain time in the yearly and weekly training cycles.

The main diet is the one that keeps an athlete lean and healthy. (See the Leaning Out and Generally Healthy Diet). This is what you eat on a daily basis in the off-season, and all the time in season except event day and a day or two before event day. The next most important diet is the one that tops off the energy stores prior to an event. This is what you eat the day or two before the event and the morning of the event. (For beginning athletes the long training day each week should be counted as an event, unless weight loss is desired). The next diet is the one that keeps your energy levels high during the event. The final diet is what you do to recharge and reward yourself after an event. Different foods and quantities are appropriate to each of these four diets. Understanding what and when to eat will help you along your way toward new peaks of athletic excellence.

So what are the components of the four diets? The main all-the-time diet is a good "healthy" diet (see below). It is low in fats, especially the saturated fats found in butter, red meat, and deep-lard-fried foods. It includes little or no processed sugar, including cakes, cookies, and candies. (Even if the candies are labeled as athletic energy foods or drinks.) It includes generous amounts of protein (about one quarter to half of a gram per pound of body weight, per day, depending on how much exercise you do.) The protein is distributed so that you get a little in every meal or snack. The main diet includes a lot of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and limited amounts of pasta, bread and potatoes. Eating a good main diet will help make you lean no matter how much or how little you exercise.

(A side note. Don't use the unmodified "Zone" diet in season or during heavy training. It is a form of crash diet and is suitable only for rapid weight loss in the off-season. If you want to count something, use the Zone numbers for protein, cut the fat and eat enough carbohydrate to end up losing no more than 1/2 pound per week in season.)

The pre-event diet is eaten starting a day (short event) or two (longer event) before the event and is like the main diet, with an added serving of white pasty foods (pasta, rice, bread or potatoes) in each meal. Notice that I say, "an extra serving", and not "as much as you can eat." The pre-event diet is in protein lower than the main diet as a percentage of total calories, but not in absolute amount of protein. The pre-event diet should be rich in easily digestible foods so you won't have to carry a load of partially digested food during the event. This means less whole grains, fibrous veggies and fatty meat than in the daily diet.

The event diet consists of very high carbohydrate foods with a little protein and almost no fat. This is where your athletic energy foods, bananas, fig bars, yams and sports drinks come in. If you eat enough during an event or hard training ride you should not be ravenous immediately afterwards. If you drink enough you should need to pee within the first half hour after getting off the bike. Your urine should be C&C (Clear and Copious). Gel-type energy foods give you a big rush and a big crash, so be sure to carry enough for the whole event, or start using them later in the event.

The post-event diet serves to recharge you physically and psychologically. Immediately after a race eat or drink some easily digestible carbohydrate and protein and drink a lot of water. Recovery drinks, whether they are laboratory-based mixes or yogurt/egg/banana/fruit juice smoothies, can really help you get back-in gear for the next day. After your warm-down and getting into clean clothing go for some food you crave. This is the only time of the week (and year) that I would recommend eating a double-bacon cheeseburger with fries and a malt. If you've stuck to your other three diets, you've earned it!



FOUR DIETS FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

The Leaning Out and Generally Healthy Diet, From Wenzel Coaching.

This diet consists of a number of rules, some of which will be important in losing unwanted weight. I can't say for sure which components are most important to you, so I'd recommend that you try to follow all of them as closely as you can. You'll also read underlying concepts before giving you the recommendations. This way you will understand why you are doing what you are doing, and that should help keep up your enthusiasm and devotion to the diet.

If you restrict your food intake such that the calories you eat are less than you expend in your daily life, you will lose weight. This is true whether you eat bizarre combinations of foods, liquid foods only, or a healthy variety of wholesome foods. To achieve a weight-losing condition you can increase your activity level, or decrease your food intake, or both.

It should be noted however that more than three to six hours of hard exercise are needed to use the calories ingested in a single large meal. Therefore it is much easier to lose weight by reducing calorie input while maintaining activity than by maintaining calorie input while increasing activity. Any diet that decreases your food intake, whether it is by eating only grapefruit or only butter, or counting and restricting total calories, or carefully counting and balancing fat, carbohydrate and protein, will result in weight loss if it reduces caloric intake below expenditure. Only a good, healthy diet will result in extensive fat loss however.

Two important questions: Can you stick to the regimen long enough to get to your target weight and body composition? And can you adopt a life-style that will allow you to stay at your targets? Once you have lost weight, if you return to your old eating habits, you will quickly return to your old weight. Weight loss must be achieved through changes that you can sustain.

A warning: hunger is your body's way of letting you know that you are losing weight, that you are in a mode of metabolism in which you are metabolizing your own fat and muscle tissues for fuel. **YOU MUST EXPERIENCE SOME HUNGER TO LOSE WEIGHT OR FAT.** However, if you experience tremendous hunger you will probably pig out, so this diet is designed to keep you from experiencing really tremendous hunger. I'd like you to be neutral or a little bit hungry and lose weight slowly. On super restrictive diets you may lose weight faster, but you will also experience more hunger and be more likely to go off the diet. Most people can safely and comfortably lose between one half pound and one pound per week while maintaining energy levels for exercise and a sunny disposition. People who are dramatically overweight can safely lose somewhat faster. No one should lose more than 2 pounds per week for an extended period.

You experience hunger when your blood sugar drops. Here's a short and simple biochemistry lesson. After a meal or a sugary snack, your blood sugar rises as food is digested in your gut and absorbed through your intestine. Insulin is a hormone that signals your body tissues to pick up sugar from the bloodstream. When you have a large meal or sugary snack, insulin levels quickly rise to control the rise in blood sugar. Fat tissue stores extra sugar as fat. Muscle tissue stores extra sugar as glycogen, which is exercise fuel. As you complete digestion of a meal, the insulin level drops along with the absorption of food from the intestine. After a sugary snack that is very quickly absorbed and gives you a burst of energy, insulin remains high after the absorption is completed. Since insulin tells tissues to scavenge sugar from the blood, blood sugar levels drop and you feel hungry again. Oops. Protein, complex carbohydrates, fibrous foods and fat, which are absorbed more slowly than sugar tend to keep the blood sugar and insulin levels relatively stable.

Enough biochemistry! On to the rules...



FOUR DIETS FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

Rule Number 1: Cut out all processed sugars. This is the hardest rule to follow, but probably also the most important. Do not eat white table sugar, cookies, cake, donuts, sports drinks, sports energy foods (for exceptions see "Four Diets for Endurance Athletes), jam, jelly... Avoid sweetened bread, and anything else that tastes sweet from added sugar. Learn to read labels: Look out for sucrose, glucose, fructose, dextrose, and corn-syrup. You need not avoid things that have some sugar but don't taste sweet. Sugar is addictive. You will probably feel tired, draggy or ravenously hungry for about a week as you adjust to a sugar free life-style. The worse you feel, the worse addicted you are. Feel free to eat lots of fresh fruit. Several good pieces of research have shown that while fatter and thinner people often get similar total amounts of sugar, fat people get it as added sugar while thin people get it in fruits.

Rule #2: Balance in every meal. Every meal should include some low-fat protein source (fish, poultry, tofu, tempeh, beans, yogurt, cottage cheese...), some complex carbohydrate source (pasta, rice, potatoes, cous-cous, oats, corn...), a little bit of fat (it's okay to saute but not deep fry), and a lot of vegetables or fruit. Don't be afraid of fat. The more fat-free-products become available, the fatter Americans become. Could there be a connection? The only calorie counting I ever advocate is to keep approximate track of how much protein you eat: one quarter to one half a gram per day per pound of weight you want to keep.

Rule #3: Drink water and lots of it. Drink water before you eat. Urine would ideally be clear and colorless all the time. Avoid both sugar waters (sodas, lemonade, sports drinks) and fruit juices. Orange juice has about as many sugar calories as Coca-Cola. Drink water and eat fruit. If you must drink other than water, drink diluted fruit juices. Add as much water as won't ruin the flavor.

Rule #4: Lot's o' vegetables. Once you've had servings of protein and carbo-foods, if you're still not full complete the meal with raw, steamed or boiled vegetables and salads.

In the long run, weight loss or weight maintenance is about behaviors, so the rest of these rules are about eating behaviors and the psychological states that trigger them.

Rule #5: No matter what your mother said, and no matter how many children are starving in Africa, you don't have to clean your plate. Never eat to the point where you are uncomfortably full. Always leave the table still able to eat more. This leads to rule #6.

Rule #6: Eat in courses. Take a small amount of food on your plate at one time. After you finish, ask yourself if you are still hungry. If you are, take another small serving of something else. Don't take the whole package or pot of anything to the table or couch with you. Put some of whatever in a bowl so you'll have to be conscious about refilling it. Don't put yourself in the position of being full but having to eat more because there is some dish you haven't tasted yet. Leading to rule #7.

Rule #7: Don't eat to be polite. You don't need to try a little bit of everything that someone makes when you are a guest. Heap on the praise for what you do eat and then declare yourself full.

Rule #8: In restaurants, don't be afraid to assemble a meal out of salads and appetizers. If you eat the bread that's put on the table, you can probably get enough nutrition from a salad or an appetizer sized portion. In Mexican restaurants, pick one thing you like rather than go for the four item combination. You can always come back again and try the other items. Order the smallest pizza that might satisfy you. You can always get another item to fill you up.

Rule #9: Don't go overboard. Anything you do that makes your diet difficult to stick to increases the chances that you won't be successful in losing weight or in keeping it off once you've lost it. It's better to lose half a pound or a pound per week for long enough to get to your target weight than to lose two or three pounds a week for two or three weeks.



FOUR DIETS FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

If you lose more than one pound a week, (half a pound for some people) you will lose strength and power, so reduce slowly.

Rule #10: Identify your triggers. Many people diet quite well until some emotional situation comes up and then they look for comfort in food. Try to identify what's happening before you finish the whole box. Go for a walk or call a friend instead of pigging out.

Rule #11: Get weighed daily, but average the weight weekly. Your weight will fluctuate by a few pounds from day to day, especially when heavy training is affecting your state of dehydration. Therefore, rather than being concerned about your weight each morning, keep track of your average weight for each week. That will be a good indication that you are really gaining or losing weight.

Rule #12: Athletes need salt. Athletes need salt. Unless you have diagnosed high blood pressure or a family history of high blood pressure, you don't have to go out of your way to avoid salt. Salt to taste, but don't go overboard, either.

Some closing comments: All the above rules are meant to be adopted as lifestyle changes. You can't think of them as something you are just doing now to lose weight. We are trying to get you onto a sustainable regimen of healthy eating. When you reach your target weight, you can relax the rules a little, but you'll have to be vigilant not to blow back up again. For people who need to lose weight for their riding, all the rules are supposed to help you eat less. It is quite possible to follow all the rules and still eat more. If you do this you will gain and not lose weight. The goal is to take control of your eating.