

What Should You Eat Before and After Your Workout?

Gather a dozen nutrition and fitness experts. Ask them what they recommend for pre- and post-workout snacks. If I know anything about health experts, you'll get about a dozen answers.

I always base my recommendations on science. Even then, certain topics invite debate. Among them: what to eat before and after a workout.

Before we discuss fuel, we need to discuss exercise. My philosophy is that working out should be intense. You should get hot and sweaty, and it might hurt a little.

Listen, I love when clients tell me they park their cars further from the mall doors or take the stairs. Movement counts, period. That said, I don't consider walking to be serious exercise. To me, walking is essential.

Real exercise involves intensity, whether that means short, all-out bursts of movement or challenging weight resistance to stimulate growth hormone, build muscle, better handle sugar and stress, burn fat, and boost your metabolism.

To get these benefits from exercise, you'll probably need to break a sweat and get out of your comfort zone.

What to Eat for Pre-Workout Food?

You need energy, of course, for vigorous exercise. You probably interpret energy as food, but you also have some energy stored in your muscles as glycogen. That's one reason you may or may not require pre-workout food. I recommend that you listen to your body.

Some people can work out well in the morning on an empty stomach. They go into the gym and maintain steady energy throughout their grueling workout. Others, like myself, do better with a protein and carb mini-meal - say, half a protein shake - rather than try to go full-throttle after 12 hours of fasting.

If working out on an empty stomach in the morning leaves you lagging for energy, have a protein shake or mini-meal. If you work out later in the day, I recommend working out two to three hours after a meal or one hour after a smaller snack.

What you don't want to do is eat a big meal or a high-fat snack before you workout. Give your body adequate time to digest food, so it can optimally fuel your muscles while you work out.

I should add that a cup of organic coffee makes great morning pre-workout fuel, especially if you're working out on an empty stomach. Just don't use caffeine as a crutch for poor sleep or underlying issues like adrenal fatigue.

What to Eat for Post-Workout Food?

I discussed intense exercise earlier for a reason: a vigorous workout burns a lot of sugar. But wait, you say. You want to burn fat, not sugar. Well, stay with me.



Intense exercise burns more sugar *during* exercise, and more fat and calories overall. Burst training and other rigorous exercise require more *post-workout* recovery.

After your workout your body looks to refuel those muscle stores (as glycogen), preferably as soon as possible. Muscle repair, also known as muscle protein re-synthesis, demands carbohydrates to refuel your muscle's energy stores and protein to help your muscles rebuild and recover.

When bodybuilders speak of a "magic window," they're talking about that first hour after their workouts where their bodies are most efficient at refueling their muscle stores.

When we work out vigorously, we all have that magic window.

You want to eat correctly, then, during that magic hour. This is especially critical for your next workout, since how you refuel after this workout will determine available energy for your next workout.

Essentially, then, your post-workout fuel - protein and carbs - will mimic what you had before your workout.

The one carbohydrate you absolutely should avoid is fructose, which will shut down post-exercise fat burning. (Come to think of it: just ditch fructose, period.) Don't finish your workout and then gulp an agave-sweetened smoothie or protein-enhanced fruit juice, which are full of fructose.

My favorite post-workout meal is a plant-based (but not soy) protein powder blended with low-sugar fruit (berries or cherries are perfect) and unsweetened coconut milk. If you have a post-workout meal, combine clean lean protein, slow-release high-fiber carbs, and healthy fats.

Readers – Like I said before, a lot of contention centers around the perfect pre- and post-workout fuel. What have you found works for you to sustain energy during an intense workout and to provide optimal nourishment and recovery after your workout? Leave a comment below, and let us know.