What to Eat Post Workout

Replenish your energy after your workout with these smart protein and carb snack combos.

By Lisa Kovalovich Whitmore

Whether you work up a sweat in the morning or evening, chances are you grab a little bite before you hit the gym. A snack before you [work out](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/workout/?lc=int_mb_1001) helps give you energy and stamina to go the distance. But did you know that eating a snack *after* you work out is even more important? "You want to make sure you feed your body to help repair muscle tissues and replenish glycogen stores [which are depleted after a strenuous [workout](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/videos/exercises/workout.htm?lc=int_mb_1001)]," says Kristin Reisinger, MS, RD, a sports nutritionist and competitive figure athlete based in New Jersey. Here, six top snacks to fuel your body post [workout](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/videos/exercises/workout.htm) (Reisinger recommends chasing each of these snacks with 8-12 ounces of water).

Protein Shake with Banana

"After a [workout](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/videos/exercises/workout.htm?lc=int_mb_1001), you want ample protein combined with a carbohydrate," says Reisinger. A protein shake made from whey protein, water, and half a banana is a great choice, since your body quickly turns it into energy.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 2 scoops of whey protein powder combined with water and 1/2 banana, 250 [calories](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/fitness/multimedia.jsp?multimediaId=/templatedata/fitness/multimedia/data/1130272109023.xml&lc=int_mb_1001)

Peanut Butter & Banana on Rice Cakes

If you're craving something more substantial after a workout, a [healthy](http://www.fitnessmagazine.com/recipes/?lc=int_mb_1001) peanut butter and banana sandwich will fit the bill. Instead of bread, smooth your peanut butter onto two brown rice cakes for extra fiber (without empty carbs). And while you may usually avoid bananas because they're too full of sugar, eating one after a workout is just fine. "This is one of the only times I recommend a high-glycemic carbohydrate source such as banana, because the uptake will be rapid," says Reisinger. Translation: It'll replenish your energy quickly.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 1/2 banana, 1 tbsp. peanut butter, and 2 brown rice cakes, 215 calories

Hummus and Pita

Another great carb/protein combo: Hummus and whole wheat pita. Hummus, a dip made from pureed chickpeas, gives you both carbs and protein. Coupled with the slow-release energy from the whole wheat pita, it makes for a snack that'll keep you fueled for hours.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 1/4 cup hummus with 1 whole wheat pita, 275 calories

Yogurt and Fresh Berries

Protein makes sense after a workout, since it contains amino acids that help build muscle. "Your muscles are depleted of amino acids after a workout, so you need an adequate supply of protein to help build them up," says Reisinger. Low-fat yogurt can pack nearly 15 grams of protein; add some berries for carbohydrate-driven energy.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 1 8-ounce container of plain, low-fat yogurt with 1/2 cup berries, 180 calories

Tuna on Whole Wheat

What could be more filling after a workout than half a sandwich? And when you choose its filling wisely, you'll be building muscle while you eat, too! "Research shows that carbs and protein together have a better response to post-workout recovery," says Reisinger. Tuna drizzled with a little lemon juice and olive oil spread over a slice of whole wheat bread is an ideal protein/carb mini-meal.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 4 ounces water-packed tuna and 1 slice whole wheat bread, 220 calories

Turkey and Cheese with Apple Slices

If you're not in the mood for a sandwich, skip the bread and eat the fillings on their own! Spread a soft-cheese wedge over two or three slices of lean deli turkey, then roll up for a quick, high-protein, eat-on-the-go snack. Add a sliced apple for some energy-boosting (and glycogen-replenishing) carbs.

*Recommended Serving Size:* 4 ounces deli turkey, 1 soft cheese wedge, and 1 apple, 240 calories

Your muscles rely on carbohydrate foods like breads, cereals, pasta, rice, fruits, and vegetables for quick energy.

You need protein for your muscles and for your blood cells, which bring nutrients and oxygen to your muscles.

You also need fluids, or your body will have a hard time performing at its best.

**Is there an ideal meal to eat before exercise?**

There's no one meal that you need to eat before working out. Instead, focus on these 5 things:

1. Low fat
2. Moderate in carbs and protein
3. Low fiber
4. Includes fluids
5. Made up of familiar foods that you tolerate well

A grilled chicken sandwich or a slice of cheese pizza might fit the pregame meal description, but stay clear of the fried food (including french fries), greasy burgers, and soft drinks.

Also, a pregame meal isn't the time to try a new food.

**Why is it so important to drink plenty of liquids during exercise?**

Water acts as your body’s cooling system. You don't want to get dehydrated.

The best way to stay hydrated is to drink plenty of fluids with meals, and drink about 2 cups (16 ounces) of water 2 hours before exercise.

**Is it better to stay hydrated with sports drinks or plain water?**

Water is often enough. But if you're exercising for more than 60 minutes in hot, humid conditions, sports drinks may help. They give you carbs and sodium, as well as fluids.

Sports drinks are also a good choice if you play team sports like soccer or football, especially when the temperature and humidity are high. If you sweat a lot, a sports drink might be preferable to water.

**Is it bad to exercise on an empty stomach, especially in the morning?**

It depends on the type of exercise. A brisk walk or light jog on an empty stomach is fine; just drink a glass of water before heading out the door.

For more intense exercise, eat some easy-to-digest carbs (a packet of instant grits, a slice of toast, half a plain bagel, a banana, or a cup of fruit cocktail washed down with a glass of water) to help provide fuel.

Eating and exercise go hand in hand. When and what you eat can be important to how you feel when you exercise, whether it's a casual workout or training for a competition. Consider these eating and exercise tips.

**1. Eat a healthy breakfast**

If you exercise in the morning, get up early enough to finish breakfast at least one hour before your workout. Most of the energy you got from dinner the previous night is used up by morning, and your blood sugar might be low. If you don't eat, you might feel sluggish or lightheaded when you exercise.

If you plan to exercise within an hour after breakfast, eat a light breakfast or drink something to raise your blood sugar, such as a sports drink. Emphasize carbohydrates for maximum energy.

Good breakfast options include:

* Whole-grain cereals or bread
* Low-fat milk
* Juice
* Bananas
* Yogurt
* A waffle or pancake

And remember, if you normally have coffee in the mornings, a cup before your workout is probably OK. Also know that anytime you try a food or drink for the first time before a workout, you risk an upset stomach.

**2. Size matters**

Be careful not to overdo it when it comes to how much you eat before exercise. The general guideline:

* **Large meals.** Eat these at least three to four hours before exercising.
* **Small meals.** Eat these two to three hours before exercising.
* **Small snacks.** Eat these an hour before exercising.

Eating too much before you exercise can leave you feeling sluggish. Eating too little might not give you the energy to keep you feeling strong throughout your workout.

**3. Snack well**

Most people can eat small snacks right before and during exercise. The key is how you feel. Do what works best for you. Snacks eaten soon before exercise probably won't give you added energy, but they can help keep up your blood sugar and prevent distracting hunger pangs. Good snack options include:

* Energy bars
* Bananas or other fresh fruit
* Yogurt
* Fruit smoothies
* Whole-grain bagel or crackers
* Low-fat granola bars
* Peanut butter sandwiches