

MIND
your
BODY

Eat the right foods before and after a workout to get the most out of your fitness routine.

POON CHIAN HUI reports

Eating the right "fuel" foods is a must if you want to get the best out of your exercise routine.

"It's like topping up your car's petrol tank before a long drive," said Dr Tan Jee Lim, a consultant orthopaedic sports surgeon at Gleneagles Medical Centre.

The fuel referred to is glucose, a simple sugar needed by cells to produce energy in muscles.

Failure to fuel up adequately before exercise can result in hypoglycemia, a condition in which blood sugar levels dip dangerously low. This can cause the person to faint midway through the sports activity, for example, said Dr Tan.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a dietitian at Aptima Nutrition and Sports Consultants, said that eating right can also benefit the athlete by promoting optimal performance and delaying the onset of fatigue.

She recommends foods high in carbohydrate but low in fat before exercising or a sports event. Timing of fuelling up differs. For instance, endurance athletes like marathon runners should load up three to five days ahead while others should do so one to four hours before the event.

Some examples of fuel foods are plain breakfast cereal with milk and fruit, bread with honey, oatmeal, baked potatoes and noodle soup.

"Not only do these foods fuel muscle and liver glycogen stores, they also help to prevent excessive fluid loss and stomach discomfort during exercise," said Ms Reutens.

Glycogen is the storage form of the sugar glucose.

However, energy alone is not enough. People doing sports also have increased needs for protein, vitamins and minerals, she added.

Iron, for example, is a key nutrient for endurance athletes.

"Iron loss is high during endurance



THE NEW PAPER FILE PHOTO

events in particular," she explained. "A lack of iron causes fatigue and poor recovery."

Hence, paying attention to nutrition after exercise is important. When we exercise, our body is working harder. The heart and lungs work harder to deliver more oxygen to muscle cells. In the muscles, the fuel glucose and oxygen combine to produce energy via highly controlled "combustions", said Dr Tan.

It is therefore normal for muscles to suffer minute damage during exercise, he said. This explains why we experience muscle aches.

However, the body is not superhuman – it needs nutrients to aid its recovery. The importance of "recovery foods", therefore, cannot be understated.

Some examples are fruit-flavoured yogurt which contains vitamins and fibre, chicken and tuna sandwiches and muesli bars, said Ms Reutens.

However, Dr Tan warned against over-eating, which can cause unhealthy weight gain. One should also avoid eating fatty foods before exercising as they are hard to digest.

"Like a car, our bodies also need the correct octane of fuel," he said. "Too much fuel or overly rich fuel doesn't buy you additional mileage."

Another fuel that we should not ignore is water. Dehydration not only causes performance to drop, but it also endangers your health.

Sports drinks are good options as they contain minerals like sodium and potassium, which are lost through sweat, said Ms Reutens.

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