



Marshfield Area YMCA Sharks Swim Team

Dietary Guidelines – Short Course 2008

This set of guidelines is not intended to be the end-all set of answers on what and how to eat, but rather an easy overview on how to set yourself up for feeling good and swimming fast. There are a few components to this: the overall approach, how to balance your diet with training, and how to prepare your body for competition. Some of this changes depending on what phase of training you're in, and make sure to be flexible and allow your body to tell you what it needs. Listen to your body!

General, off-season, and pre-season:

Use this time to start phasing in dietary changes, that is if you're used to a junky or sporadic diet. If you're used to skipping breakfast or eating a lot of chips in the evening, it's best to train yourself into a new eating schedule or wean yourself off of the junk before the training gets heavy. Your body will fight back with withdrawal, so do it while the training is light – it will make things easier on you when the training gets heavy!

For your eating schedule, try to eat 3-5 times a day. While the training is light, your body won't quite need a lot of food, so get into the habit of eating a bit smaller, but more often – if you eat roughly the same amount per day as before, but split it up evenly between more meals, your digestive system will have an easier workload spread out over more time. Big meals divert more blood to your digestive tract and away from your muscles and brain. Smaller meals allow an easier balance, allowing you to feel more “light.”

When it comes to balance, don't try too hard to get an exact balance, but keep an overall idea in mind: you need carbs, protein, fiber, and fat. If you can, try to keep a somewhat even balance from one meal to the next, and try to avoid heavily processed foods. Crap that's loaded with preservatives and artificial flavors will tax your liver – it will work overtime trying to filter all of that crud out of your blood!

To maintain balance, think of each meal and what your body needs. If you need meat and protein with lunch and dinner, you need it with breakfast too! All too often people eat really sugary cereals in the morning that make them “bonk” before 11 AM, making them feel groggy and hoping for lunch. Next, they eat a somewhat bigger lunch, and evn bigger dinner!

Also, keep in mind that your body not only needs carbs, protein, fiber, and fat, but also nutrients. These come in the form of the vitamins and minerals we know of, as well as fatty acids, amino acids, and all sorts of other neat things. Fruits and vegetables are loaded in fiber, but also come with plenty of vitamins and minerals. The deeper the colors in your fruits and vegetables, the more likely they are to have valuable nutrients. Spinach and other green, leafy vegetables are better than iceberg lettuce (which is mainly water), while bell peppers offer more vitamin C and other nutrients than white onions. The more diversity you have in your diet, the more likely you'll get all the nutrients you need!



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Breakfast:

If you eat cereal, make sure it's something like raisin bran, which is relatively high in fiber and low in sugar (at least compared to other cereals). Have some fruit with or on your cereal, whether it's bananas or oranges. There's no problem with some fat in your breakfast, so don't be scared away from whole milk. Just don't eat a half pound of bacon! Because cereal and fruit provide a bit more sugar compared with protein and fat, try to balance those in with some eggs and/or meat. In Germany, a lot of people eat cold-cut sandwiches for breakfast and don't have the 11 AM "crash" that's so common in the US! If you have a sandwich with or shortly after breakfast, it'll help more than it will hurt.

Do you drink coffee or soda with breakfast? If so, don't worry about cutting it out unless you're drinking a half-pot of coffee or 3 cans of soda. Just remember that caffeine not only wakes you up, but also makes you pee more than you drink. So if you want the coffee, have some juice and water to go with it, so you don't get dehydrated later in the day.

Lunch:

If you eat sandwiches for lunch, make sure to use whole-wheat bread. Not the kind that comes in light, footlong, airy loaves, but the kind that feels like a brick when you're holding it. It has lots of fiber, and won't leave your body pumping insulin to compensate for the sugar load! Real whole wheat bread can be seem dry, but your body does need fat, so put some butter on it! Add some meat, and a plethora of vegetables and you have a balanced lunch right in your sandwich. Just make sure to drink plenty of fluids to go with it. Milk, juice, water, all good. If you're one of those caffeine addicts who had 2 cups of coffee in the morning, feel free to reward yourself with a coke for dessert. Just make sure the water, milk, or juice get in your system first.

If you're not a sandwich eater, go for pasta or a stir-fry. Just make sure that you still maintain the overall balance between carbs, protein, and vegetables. The more veggies the better! Again, balance is key.

Dinner:

When it comes to eating dinner, this is the meal where most Americans go overboard. Great idea. NOT! If you eat a bigger dinner than you do lunch and breakfast, and go straight to the TV for a few hours and then bed, your system will be out of whack all the next day. Your metabolism (which is the regulating system in your body that turns food into energy) will not know whether to generate energy or to store fat. Make sure your dinner is comparable in size and balanced roughly the same to the other 2 meals daily, and you will notice more stable levels of energy throughout the day as well. Skip the coffee or soda with dinner, and you'll find that it's much easier to sleep at night! Don't skip on the fluids though. Milk and juice or water are still mandatory!



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Snacks:

Remember, I listed 3 meals! For those in-between times when your body tells you it wants food, listen! Just make sure to be smart about it. You don't need to over-analyze snack time (remember, you can't spell "over-analyze" without "overly-anal"), so don't worry too much about the overall balance. Just make sure you don't eat junk. If your snack is somewhat healthy and allows you to make it to the next meal without bonking, you'll be fine. The overall goal of your snack is to keep your blood sugar from hitting rock-bottom, without spiking it as well. Veggies and dip allow you to pack on more nutrients, as well as a small amount of protein and fat. Easy! Otherwise, if you keep a sandwich with you, that'll work too. Just avoid the chocolate and potato chips. Packing a simple snack is cheaper and easier on your body.

Regular Season:

The overall balance during the regular training season stays mostly the same. Make sure you're hitting up a decent amount of carbs, protein, fiber, and nutrients. When we hit the big amounts of conditioning, however, your body is going to ask for more overall. Give it more, but just make sure you're keeping a smart balance of what you need. The training we do will be easy to figure out, so make sure you adjust your diet based on what the training is.

Early in the season, we're going to be doing a lot of dryland training to build strength. As we add on the strength work, add a bit more protein to each meal to allow your body to build muscle. As the season goes on, we'll be throwing on a lot of aerobic base and anaerobic threshold training, which are very energy-intensive. Keep the protein, but add some more carbs for the additional energy required. Remember that whatever tweaks you make to your diet need to be applied evenly from one meal to the next. So if we get into the main part of the season and need an extra bowl of cereal, add another banana and an egg too (or however you get your balance!). Make sure that every meal gets the same amount of attention.

If on a given day, you are craving a big slab of meat, it's probably for a reason: pile it on! Occasionally throwing off your balance to satisfy your body's needs is fine. Just make sure to be smart about it overall.

During Practice:

During practice, you'll want to make sure to bring on plenty of water! A few sips between reps can make a world of difference in how you feel. Gatorade works well at keeping your system stocked with salts and sugars, and even soda isn't all that bad! If you do go with soda, make sure to shake all of the carbonation out in advance so you don't get bloated down! If you do drink gatorade or soda during practice, make sure to drink plain water as well. If a given practice is more than 5000-6000 yards, it won't hurt to bring a small snack to nibble on between sets. Even candy bars will help!



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After Practice:

After practice, you have a 20-minute window to replenish your glycogen stores (the sugar stored in your muscles) at the highest rate. Right after practice, have a gatorade, a coke, or a candy bar to help your body recover quickly. Just make sure that you have a balanced high-grade snack or a full meal within an hour or two after that so the sugar doesn't cause a crash later.

Competition:

This is where things get interesting. A big 3-day meet can throw your body off big time, so we have think about it in advance, and prepare ourselves mentally for what we're going to go through. In order to compete as well as possible, we can't afford to have our digestive systems working overtime, robbing our muscles and brain of the blood they need to perform. In the mid 1990's, coaches took this to the extreme, telling us to eat light days and weeks in advance, and eating next to nothing on the day of competition. Your head coach learned as a swimmer how bad this idea was when his blood sugar crashed and he had a seizure halfway through Y state in 1998.

To learn from this, but still keep the overall perspective in mind, we'll look at it this way: the night before competition, make sure to eat according to your normal overall balance, but add some more easily digestible, energy-rich, starchy carbs to stock your muscles with the glycogen they'll need tomorrow.

On the day of competition, this is where things can get interesting. We want to eat enough to have energy for our races, but we don't want to get to the point of being bogged down. If you eat your breakfast early enough (2-3 hours before your first race), you don't have to worry too much about it, but still be smart. Because we're not looking to build muscle on race day, we're going to go for easily digestible energy, and that means carbs. Pasta, bagels, breads, and rice all fit into this category. Stay off the simple sugars, because those will lead to a spike/crash cycle that will throw you off physically, mentally, and emotionally. Eat just enough protein and fat to keep your body from betraying you, but stay off the McDonald's! Competing will generate a lot of nasty byproducts in your blood, so stay hydrated all day to allow your system to easily remove all those nasty demons. If you pee clear all day, that's a good thing!

Once the meet starts, then you've got to be even more careful. You don't want to be eating a lot of substance before each event to bog you down, but you don't want to go so light that you crash! Just remember that after each event, you have a 20-minute window to get sugar into your system for fast absorption. Gatorade and a powerbar or hershey's bar will work well. If it looks like you've got more time between events (like an hour or more), feel free to go for a more substantial snack, (like a bagel with some cream cheese) but not quite a full meal.



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After your last event, keep in mind the 20-minute window and get some simple sugars/carbs into your system pronto, and also make sure to get a full meal down the hatch within an hour or two of that. If there is another day or more remaining in the meet, make sure your dinner follows the overall balance rules, and don't worry about eating too much. Just keep the fluids going!

Summary:

Think about what you eat, and maintain a nutritional balance within each meal. Also, maintain that balance from one meal to the next. Don't eat so much at each meal that you can't sit up, but don't starve yourself either. Phase these habits in during the off-season or pre-season, so that you can get yourself to stick to them when the going gets tough. Listen to your body! If you start losing weight too quickly or are feeling starved all the time, ramp up how much you eat to balance it out. Balance is always the key. Stay away from "fad" diets that promise too much. If you listen to your body and respond accordingly, you'll be fine. When a big competition comes around, be confident that what you're doing is right. If you worry too much about "following the rules" on race day and start doubting whether you've done the right thing, you've just lost your focus. So do your best, allow yourself to feel good, and feel happy!