

Nutrition to power up active lifestyles

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With an abundance of good weather, scenic outdoor environments and a national culture infused with a love of sports, it's not surprising that active lifestyles are important to many South Africans.



Gym, walking and hiking, running, cycling and swimming, soccer, tennis and lately, padel are popular pastimes helping us to keep fit and offering welcome respite from the daily grind.

If you've been a sports enthusiast all your life or are just starting to explore physical activities that you enjoy, it's essential to understand the role that nutrition plays in an active lifestyle.

[ADSA](#) spokesperson and registered dietitian, Kelly Scholtz says, "Whether you exercise routinely or play a favourite sport weekly or fit the definition of a lifestyle athlete who participates in competitive events, it's important to recognise that you have somewhat different nutrient requirements than average.

"Your nutritional intake must be tailored to support the additional demand for energy, as well as for the micronutrients, protein and anti-inflammatory nutrients that are required for healthy recovery from exercise. As beneficial as it is, exercise does represent a form of stress to the body. Although this is a positive type of stress, your body still requires adequate nutritional support for optimal adaptation to your exercise routine."

"Paying attention to your nutrition boosts not just your performance in your favourite sport but plays a preventative health role that enhances your overall enjoyment of your active lifestyle."

Start with a balanced diet

Your nutritional choices before, during, and after exercise influence both performance and recovery. However, this all rests on the foundation of having an overall healthy, balanced diet.

People with active lifestyles start by supporting their health, well-being, and performance with a general eating regime that

prioritises fruit and vegetables, legumes, lean proteins, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and healthy fats such as olive and avocado oils. It's best to focus on meals made from whole foods rather than those that are highly processed.

Limit your alcohol intake and the use of tobacco or nicotine products.

Scholtz says, "During exercise, particularly higher intensity exercise, your body uses glucose as its preferred fuel. Glucose is usually readily available in your blood after a recent meal or is quickly delivered from your body's stores of glycogen in the muscles and liver. In the case of lower intensity activity, your body is also able to tap into fat stores for energy."

"If you are training for less than or up to an hour, there is probably no need to eat or drink any extra calories or carbohydrates during that session. Plain water for hydration will do. Your body can fuel a training session of that length provided you are eating a healthy diet, which enables your body to top up its glycogen stores."

Overlay your energy, macro- and micronutrient needs

For endurance activities lasting anywhere from an hour to up to 2.5 hours, refuelling during the session with 45-60g of carbohydrates per hour is generally recommended. There's no need for expensive supplements or special branded products, as typical sports drinks, water and everyday foods like bananas, dates and peanut butter sandwiches can be effective during endurance activities.

Scholtz says, "The exact foods or drinks you consume can vary, and it's a good idea to see what works for you during training rather than trying something new on race day. Individuals can have different reactions to different foods and drinks, and you don't want to get a stomach-ache or worse at a critical time. So, if you are preparing for a sports event, then use your training sessions to test out the foods and drinks that work best for you."

Rehydrate and recharge post-workout

After a high-energy sports or training session, you can support your body's recovery from the strain of exercise and promote muscle repair and adaptation with a snack or drink within 30 minutes. Optimal recovery snacks include a mix of protein and carbohydrates like milk with a banana, chocolate milk, an energy bar with lean biltong, or eggs or hummus on toast.

Nutrition for elite athletes with registered dietitian, Shelly Meltzer

Each year, tens of thousands of South African sports enthusiasts enter a range of gruelling endurance competitions, such as the upcoming Comrades Marathon, as well as numerous trail, mountain biking, and triathlon events over the course of a year.

Performance is important to them with this year's best-ever time representing a significant affirmation that they are living their best lives. At this level of focus, it is most likely that participants understand the nutritional basics and are searching for the 'magic bullet'.

The nutritional needs of well-trained athletes may be different from those of lifestyle athletes, and Meltzer explains, "Some well-trained or elite athletes participating in ultra-endurance (>2.5 hours) events at high intensities may benefit from 90-120g carbohydrate per hour during the event, but in that case, their gut would be 'well-adapted' to this, having trained with specific mixes of carbohydrate-based products."

She therefore advises, "Athletes who are serious about their events need to be thoughtful about the science of sports nutrition and tailor this to their unique requirements."

In terms of supplements, Meltzer says, "Worldwide, the sports nutrition supplement market is huge, and it's no different in South Africa. There's a dazzling array of athletic performance promises, but too often, there's no evidence to back them up. As a nutrition expert with many years of sports nutrition experience and rooted in the latest science, I'm not linked to

specific sports nutrition brands and products.”

“At whatever level of athletic performance, amateur or professional, what works brilliantly for someone you compete against may fail you. The diet and supplements that power one athlete into the top ten, can sink another. My approach is food-first. From there, we can see what supplementation can boost your performance. The right sports nutritional supplements should be the cherry on top, not the meal.”

One also needs to consider the potential side effects of supplements, how and when to use them, and athletes need to be aware of banned substances that may be advertently or inadvertently included in nutritional supplements.

Meltzer concludes, “This is an industry buffeted by marketing trends. So, from time to time, you will see the market flooded with compelling content about the newest craze supplement. In response, the audience shifts focus, and suddenly, we have athletes obsessed with the latest ‘magic pill’ or ‘salt’ that may not meet their specific requirements.

Ultimately, this kind of blowing in the wind due to mercurial marketing forces falls far short of addressing the essential, complex, and multi-dimensional needs of athletes, who must be focused on their individuality, their goals at a particular phase of training, the circumstances of their event, including their travelling and competition demands, the environment and access to food, and their nutritional preferences. The beauty of a dietitian-led, sports-specific and athlete-centred approach is that it can address this level of uniqueness.”

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