

12 Foods Every Athlete Should Eat

Who do you think is going to last longer on the field: the guy who sucked down a bag of Cheetos 15 minutes before the game, or the athlete who had sweet potatoes and tuna for lunch? We'll give you a hint: powdery sticks of fried cornmeal are not what fuel most top athletes. So what does? That's what we asked nutrition experts who work with pro athletes in several sports. Here were their 12 most common recommendations.

Sweet Potatoes

These orange tubers are relatively easy to prepare and incredibly potent fueling options for athletes. "[Sweet potatoes] are an excellent source of vitamin A and a good source of vitamin C and some of the B vitamins," says Kelly Pritchett, assistant professor at Central Washington University. "Athletes can eat it for lunch and dinner topped with a protein source like cottage cheese or black beans." Get started with [5 non-boring ways to eat sweet potatoes](#).

Oatmeal

This breakfast staple can also be tossed into protein shakes to kick up the carb and calorie count if you're looking to pack on weight. Just make sure to opt for steel-cut—[instant oats have a glycemic index of 83, compared to 55 for the "average" oat](#). This means that the instant option is more likely to cause an insulin spike, which will cause you to store all those carbs as flab.

"Oatmeal is a great source of carbohydrate energy for athletes, plus it's high in fiber, which keeps you full longer and helps maintain glucose levels," says Pritchett. "[Plus it's] 100 percent whole grain, which may reduce the risk of heart disease."

Bananas

Bananas are extremely convenient for busy athletes—portable and encased in biodegradable wrappers. They also deliver a potent dose of good nutrition. "Bananas are an excellent source of potassium, an electrolyte that gets lost in sweat and helps maintain low blood pressure," says Nancy Clark, MS, RD and author of [Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook](#). "Bananas are also a good source of carbs to fuel the muscles, and they taste great with chocolate milk and/or peanut butter, [which are] other good sports foods."

RELATED: [How To Build A Performance Building Smoothie](#)

Oranges

Another athlete-friendly food that comes pre-wrapped. “Oranges are rich in vitamin C to help with healing and boost the immune system,” Clark says. “[They’re] also juicy and refreshing, which makes them a great snack at halftime.”

Nuts

“[They are] nutrient dense—dense in overall calories and good for athletes with high caloric needs, but also dense in good nutrients,” says Kate Patton, RD, who works with the Cleveland Indians. “[Nuts have] unsaturated fat to fight inflammation, protein to support recovery, fiber to help maintain energy levels, and vitamins and minerals to support all the physiological functions they play a role in.” Some nuts high in monounsaturated fat include pecans, peanuts and walnuts. Munch on a handful between classes or sprinkle them into Greek yogurt for a quick, healthy breakfast.

Olive Oil

“Olive oil [is a good choice] because its monounsaturated fat elicits anti-inflammatory benefits to athletes, who put a lot of stress on their bodies,” says Patton. You can add olive oil to your diet quite easily: Drizzle it over pasta with some salt and pepper to carb up after practice, or spritz it on top of a salad at lunch.

Salmon

This is a heavy hitter when it comes to athlete nutrition. It’s loaded with muscle-building protein and anti-inflammatory omega-3 fats, which can help you recover from bumps and bruises more quickly. Drizzle some olive oil over a salmon filet, give it a few squeezes of lemon and toss it in the oven—you’ve got dinner.

RELATED: [5 Non-Boring Ways To Eat Salmon](#)

Flax Seed

Flax seed is also high in anti-inflammatory omega-3’s, while packing fiber and a moderate amount of protein. Sprinkle them into soups or over salads for a flavor (and nutrition) boost.

Whey Protein

There’s a reason why bodybuilders, athletes and health-minded folks swear by this stuff. Whey protein (along with other foods) has a Protein Digestibility Corrected Amino Acid Score (PDCAAS) score of 1. The PDCAAS score of a food is the “gold standard” in protein, measuring a food’s ability to deliver essential amino acids to the body. A score of 1 is the highest a food can achieve. Whey earns its place on this list since it’s incredibly easy for athletes to tote around and consume. Of course, if you’re not interested in plunking down your hard earned cash, you can just drink a glass of milk. Whey (and casein, which also has a PDCAAS of 1) is a derivative of

milk. You can mix the protein powder into a cool glass of water for a midafternoon snack, or [down a glass of chocolate milk for a potent, inexpensive post-workout recovery beverage](#).

Tuna

Tuna, another food with a PCDAAS of 1, is only slightly more difficult to prepare than a protein shake, especially if you buy the canned stuff. Mix it with avocado and spread it on whole wheat bread for an easy, healthy lunch, or pull it and toss it with a salad.

Eggs

“Eggs are just such a nutritious food and the perfect food to have for breakfast,” says Erica Giovinazzo MS, RD and a trainer at Brick CrossFit in New York City. “They're high in protein, good fat and the yolks are rich in carotenoids, a nutrient that can help eye health.”

RELATED: [Better Ways To Cook Eggs](#)

Coconut Oil

If you've never cooked with it, now's the time to start. It's packed with medium chain triglycerides, which can power you through those last grueling minutes of a practice or game. “Coconut oil is one of the best oils you can have in your diet because it's great to cook with,” Giovinazzo says. “It has a high smoke point, so it can be cooked at a high heat. Some research has said that coconut oil may also be good for metabolism and energy from fats because it is high in medium chain triglycerides (MCTs).”