**The Ultimate Guide to Workout Nutrition**

We’re more concerned than ever with maximizing our workout efforts and getting the fastest results. Effective workouts demand complete nutrition, and these simple guidelines will help make the right choices to refuel the body.

**Recovery Time is Critical**

Recovery should be thought of as a window of opportunity. Approximately 30 minutes after cardio, the body is optimized to replenish its energy stores— muscle and liver glycogen. For strength training, the window is extended up to two hours post-workout. Muscle protein synthesis occurs, setting off muscle tissue recovery and repair, replacing fluids, and helping the body adapt to the stresses of the workout.

**Strength Training**

Pre-workout: Building lean muscle requires a ready supply of protein for tissue repair. The more intense your efforts, the more protein you’ll need. Carbohydrates should constitute 75 percent of a pre-workout meal, and protein should constitute 25 percent. Protein must first be broken down into amino acids in order to be used by muscles to repair and build lean tissue. 1-2 hours prior to strength training, consume protein in order to have an adequate reserve for the upcoming workout. The amount of protein required is based on body weight, intensity level, length of workout, and gender. Recent studies suggest taking in around 10-20 grams of high-quality protein within 2 hours after strength training is usually enough to jumpstart recovery and prevent muscle loss.

**Cardio**

Pre-workout nutrition for a cardio session requires more carbs than protein. Carbs give you the energy to power through an intense workout. Carbohydrates should constitute 75-10 percent of a pre-workout meal. Carbs are metabolized into glucose (energy) very quickly. Your [pre-workout](http://www.builtlean.com/2012/01/24/pre-workout-meal/) meal should be consumed between 30-60 minutes before hitting the gym. Add protein and fiber to deliver a steadier supply of energy throughout the workout and prevent fatigue resulting from consuming only carbs. Low glycemic index (GI) carbs release sugar into the bloodstream more slowly and tend to contain more essential nutrients like fiber. They are generally optimal to consume 30-60 minutes prior to either a strength training or cardio workout (also good to consume post-workout). Examples include whole foods like whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and beans. High GI carbs release sugar very quickly, providing a quick but brief energy boost. Best to consume before an intense cardio workout, and examples include white bread, white rice, and packaged snacks.

**Strength Training**

Your pre-workout meal should include low GI carbs to give you the energy you’ll need, and protein-rich foods to store in reserve. **Examples include:** Egg white omelet with spinach, whole grain toast, and skim or soy milk. Smoothie of protein powder, soy or skim milk, high GI fruits— such as mango, peach, or pineapple— and flax seed. Greek yogurt with banana, walnuts, apples, and honey.

**Cardio**

Eat a small snack to help boost blood sugar levels pre-workout, especially if your cardio workout is before your first meal or between meals. **Examples include:**Whole, mixed grain hot cereal with raisins and walnuts, skim milk, and honey. Scrambled egg whites in a whole grain pita with a sliced apple. Greek yogurt parfait with layers of banana, peaches, and granola. Fruit smoothie made with soy milk, ice, banana, strawberries, and honey or brown sugar.

**Post-Workout**

After a strength training workout, dietary protein is more readily used for muscle building, rather than fat storage. A protein shake or meal within 2 hours of a workout will give your body what it needs to build lean muscle. Although many believe consuming a protein drink during a strength-training workout is best for building muscle, no significant evidence supports this. After a cardio workout, hydration is the main goal. A significant amount of water is lost through perspiration. Pure water is the best source of hydration of the average exerciser. Sports drinks like Gatorade and PowerAde replenish lost electrolytes, but contain large amounts of sugar and calories. Only athletes may need the extra electrolytes that make sports drinks worth the sugar and calories. Generally, the average workout doesn’t demand the extra calories and electrolytes in sports drinks. Coconut water is a great alternative to sports drinks, offering lots of potassium and magnesium, which restores your electrolytes. Also, after a tough cardio session, your energy resources may need replenishing with a carb-rich snack or meal. **Post-Workout choices** For strength training, protein and carbohydrates are needed after a workout to help repair muscles, replenish the body’s glycogen stores, and prevent muscle soreness. Examples: Chocolate protein shake with protein powder, skim or soy milk, and a banana. Half an avocado stuffed with cottage cheese and tomato. Spinach salad with a sliced chicken breast. Whole foods are the best option because they offer complete nutrition. They provide many micronutrients and essential fiber and help keep you feeling satiated. The best whole food choices contain complete, high-quality protein and provide nearly every essential vitamin and mineral. These include eggs, fish, chicken breast, turkey, low-fat milk, cottage cheese, and Greek yogurt. For cardio, the key is to replace both carbohydrates and electrolytes lost during a workout. Examples: Banana sliced lengthwise and spread with peanut or almond butter. Mango smoothie with mango chunks, vanilla yogurt, ice, and honey. Sliced apple with a handful of walnuts. Whole grains, fruits, and veggies are the best sources of carbs for a workout. Again, whole foods are best, but smoothies and shakes are a good quick fix. One of the best protein-carb combos is chocolate milk. It provides an optimal balance of carbs and protein and is recommended for both strength and cardio training. Chose low-fat to avoid excess fat and sugar consumption. Consume 8 ounces to obtain necessary nutrients after a workout.

**What About Nutrition for Circuit Training?**

Circuit training, combining strength training with periods of cardio work, requires just a few adjustments. Have your protein 2-3 hours before your workout. 30-60 minutes before your workout, have a carb-rich snack, such as a piece of fruit and slice of toast, or a mango smoothie. Post-workout, drink plenty of water and have a post-strength training meal with an extra carb, such as a piece of fruit. 30-60 minutes after training, replenish with a 3:1 ratio of carbohydrates and protein to ensure adequate muscle repair and recovery. Consume a regular meal 3-4 hours after a workout. The right workout nutrition is very important, but it doesn’t have to be complicated or difficult to fit in. Plan ahead to ensure the body has the right nutrients for fast, adequate recovery.

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