

EAT TO COMPETE

PEGGY WELLINGTON BSc(Hons), M.Phil
ASA CONSULTANT NUTRITIONIST

Nutritional planning for competition is an extremely important part of any event preparation. Unfortunately it is the aspect that many swimmers neglect. It is common to see months of hard physical and mental preparation ruined because a nutrition programme is ignored.

The competition diet should be an extension of the high carbohydrate training plan (see leaflet 1). It should be tried and tested in training or at a minor meet and NOT for the first time at a major competition.

Swimmers' 3 major nutritional aims when preparing for a competition should be:

- 1) **To ensure maximum storage of glycogen (carbohydrate).** Failure to do this may lead to early fatigue. Although a one off swim may not severely deplete these stores in reality, swimmers often compete in several races, warm ups, heats and finals, over one or successive days. Several bouts of exercise a day have been shown to reduce glycogen stores considerably leaving an athlete feeling jaded, lethargic and tired.
- 2) **To ensure hydration.** Swimming pools are extremely hot and humid places. Sweat losses can be high in such conditions. It is particularly easy to neglect your fluid requirements in the excitement and nervous tension of the event. Dehydration will occur if fluid losses are not replaced.
- 3) **To maintain a familiar nutrition programme.** Food is often different to 'home cooking' in the unfamiliar surroundings of a hotel or guest house. No matter how tempting, the key to successful preparation is to stick to foods which are familiar. Always pack an emergency bag of food and drinks so that you never get caught short. A little prior investigation is a wise precaution to find out what foods will be available in the hotel and pool, and plan accordingly.

DURING THE TAPER

A taper involves 'resting up' for a competition. This does not mean stopping training completely ! However, most swimmers will reduce the volume of training they do leading up to a major event. A failure to rest before the competition will result in insufficient time to replace energy stores.

When you are tapering it is important to maintain your high carbohydrate training plan. This should be accompanied by an adequate fluid intake. Some scientists suggest that you may need to increase your carbohydrate intake still further whilst tapering. This **MUST BE** accompanied by a corresponding decrease in fat intake if

weight problems are to be avoided. If you ever experience weight problems during a taper the secret is to cut down slightly on the total volume of food that you eat by reducing the fatty part of a meal/snack whilst still maintaining a high proportion of your energy intake from carbohydrate rich foods. It often helps to eat a little and often rather than trying to consume huge meals infrequently.

To boost your carbohydrate intake in the days prior to a competition follow the guidelines in Table 1 below :

Table 1 : Boosting carbohydrate for a competition.

- * Reduce the fat and protein component of the meal and add extra carbohydrate. For example have an extra potato and less meat, an extra spoonful of rice/pasta and a spoonful less oily/creamy sauce or add an extra spoonful of beans and omit the fat from the toast.
- * Choose a thick base pizza rather than a thin and crispy one but cut down on the fatty toppings i.e. more tomato, vegetables, ham, tuna, pineapple & less cheese.
- * Drink extra juice, squash or sports drink with your meal. This adds additional carbohydrate with no extra fat.
- * Add dried fruit or a sliced banana to breakfast cereal.
- * Choose carbohydrate rich, low fat snacks such as dried fruit/popcorn/tea-cakes/scones/bagels/bananas/rusks/cereal.

There is no need to stuff yourselves to the point of discomfort! A successful regime will involve eating normal sized, high carbohydrate, low fat meals and snacks to meet your requirements. A word of warning! It is easy to get carried away and, in an attempt to boost carbohydrate intake, fat levels creep up as well. In fact, fat intake should be further reduced during a taper period to ensure that calorie intake does not soar and cause weight gain.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE COMPETITION.

Continue to focus on a high carbohydrate, low fat diet with plenty of fluid. Some suggestions are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2 - The night before the competition

- * Rice or pasta with a low fat sauce
- * A noodle dish (eg chow mein)
- * Jacket potato with low fat filling
- * Deep pan pizza (watch the fatty toppings)
- * Beans on toast
- * Chunky vegetable/bean based soup and sandwiches
- * Cereal and toast
- * Boiled or mashed potato dish with lots of potato and smaller portions of meat/fish.

THE PRE-COMPETITION MEAL?

Traditionally it was believed that a high protein meal would set you up for the days events. It is still common see athletes tucking into steak, eggs and chips or indulging in other high fat delights prior to an event ! These meals offer little in the way of carbohydrate and are less than ideal for the nutrition conscious swimmer.

The aims of the pre-event meal are to top up glycogen stores , to maintain hydration, stave off hunger and give you a psychological boost.

Foods ingested during this period should be high in carbohydrate and low in fat since high fat foods digest more slowly. They should also be low in fibre and bulk if you are prone to pre-event nerves, diarrhoea or 'the trots'. The key is to choose foods which are well tolerated.

The timing and size of this meal will depend on the start time of the heats. As a general rule, leave 3-4 hours to digest a large meal and 1-2 hours for a lighter version. This timing is, however, dependent on individual preferences. The idea is to provide some carbohydrate and fluid and to satisfy hunger whilst avoiding any discomfort that might arise from eating too much too close to the start of the race.

Find out what works for you in training and stick to it. Use the 1-4 hour rule as a guide-line only and do not be influenced by what other swimmers are doing.

Some pre-event favourites are listed in Table 3:

Table 3 : PRE-EVENT MEALS AND SNACKS

Breakfast cereal and low fat milk
Porridge with syrup and raisins
Toast (scraping of fat) with honey/jam
Banana or jam sandwiches
Muffins/crumpets with jam/honey
Pancakes and syrup
Beans on toast
Bagels/toasted tea-cakes/currant buns
Pasta with tomato based sauce
Jacket potato with low fat filling

If solid foods cannot be tolerated during this time then experiment with drinks such as carbohydrate supplements (for example the ASA's Official Sports Drink, Maxim) or sports drinks such as Maxim Electrolyte, Isostar, Go, Lucozade Sport or Gatorade to top up your energy and fluid levels.

