Is it bad to eat before sports or exercise? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is it bad to eat before you have practice or a game in basketball?

?Hungry Hoopster

Answer

Dear Hungry Hoopster,

It's not necessarily "good" or "bad" to eat before practice or a game? it really depends on what and when you've eaten that day. Ideally, you want to eat so you have energy, but you don't want to eat so that you feel too full and/or experience discomfort. It's a matter of balance. Research shows that eating before exercise, as opposed to exercising on an empty stomach, improves athletic performance. Generally, a snack consumed before an activity will help fuel you for that practice or game (depending on how long the sport lasts), and also help you from becoming over hungry after the workout.

That being said, consider the following:

- It usually takes about three or four hours to digest a moderate sized meal and about one or two hours to process a light snack (these numbers depend a lot on the type of food you're eating, not to mention your very own metabolic rate). It's a good idea to allow some time for digestion prior to any strenuous activity.
- If you have practice or a game late in the afternoon, eat breakfast and lunch. Include plenty of complex carbohydrates, such as whole grain cereals, fruit, and vegetables. These replace muscle glycogen (the body's storage form of carbohydrates), and are important, especially if you exercise every day. Without replacing glycogen, your muscles will feel weak and performance may suffer.
- Remember to keep well hydrated. Our muscles are approximately 70 percent water and dehydrated muscles perform poorly, too. Drink water throughout the day.
- One meal or one snack isn't going to make up for a generally unhealthy lifestyle. Eating well helps contribute nutrients your body needs on a continual basis. Apply some of these suggestions regularly. Choose mostly whole grains, fruit, veggies, lean meats, and low-fat dairy. Drink plenty of fluids all the time? it's crucial to replace losses from exercise. Don't go longer than four hours without eating, and plan healthy or energy boosting snacks in-between larger meals.
Snack ideas for pre-game or pre-practice:

- Fruit (e.g., bananas, oranges, apples, or grapes)
- Fruit juices
- Unsalted crackers
- Graham crackers
- Bagels
- Non- or low-fat yogurt
- Pretzels (preferably with little or no salt)
- Low-fat soup, such as vegetable

High in carbohydrates, these foods are quickly digested and absorbed. Finish eating at least one hour before your practice. Foods high in fat, protein, and fiber take longer to digest and may cause discomfort. Experiment with various options. And avoid trying a new food before a competitive event... just in case.

Alice!

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