How soon after eating should workouts begin? [1]

Dear Alice,

How soon after eating should workouts begin?

Answer

Dear Reader,

There is no one answer as to how long to wait after eating before beginning physical activity. When and how much to eat depend on a number of factors such as when someone is active, the type of activity [2], and the foods that work best for that person's body. That being said, there are a few practices that can help maximize the benefits of physical activity following a meal, while minimizing any side effects. Read on for some ideas to consider when planning meal times.

- **Breakfast of champions:** It sounds cliché, but it's true? eating a balanced breakfast is especially critical on workout days. Even with early morning physical activity, it's recommended that the body has some fuel. If it's tough to stomach the idea of eating a meal that early, a smaller breakfast or a small snack such as a granola bar or an apple may be good options.
- **Optimize size:** Of the meal, that is. Depending on the size of the meal, digestion may take between one and four hours. As a general guide, it's best to wait longer to begin physical activity after larger meals. After eating a smaller meal, waiting an hour or a little less is usually enough time.
- **Go with your gut:** People vary in terms of digestion while being physically active. It's a good idea to experiment with different pre-workout foods to see the impact on how your body reacts.
- **Hydrate:** Hydration is necessary for physical activity and recovery. Not being fully hydrated may raise body temperature and blood pressure and has the potential to cause muscle cramps. It's key to hydrate before, during, and after [3] physical activity.
- **Other conditions:** For people with diabetes or other existing conditions, meal timing may be even more key. It's best to consult with a health care provider or registered dietitian to discuss options and tips.
- **Post-workout:** After being active, it's likely the body will want and need to replace some of the energy that was just burned. Research is mixed on the exact type of nutrients (e.g., carbohydrates, protein), so think healthy and satisfying (apple with peanut butter, low-sugar smoothie, yogurt with a small scoop of low-fat granola).
Everyone’s metabolism is slightly different. Generally speaking, it’s tough for the digestive system to compete with muscles for blood supply and energy so eating a large meal right before being physically active may be uncomfortable. That said, it’s best to time meals in a way that it provides enough energy during physical activity without feeling overly full or nauseous. These tips are meant to be a guide to help find the balance that best supports your goals, and you can learn even more through the related Q&As and checking out the Nutrition & Physical Activity archives.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Resources

Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside)
Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUMC)
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