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Top 5 Nutrition Mistakes Made by Smart Triathletes

BY LAUREN ANTONUCCI

YOU ARE A SMART TRIATHLETE: You wake up at 5 a.m., routinely decline a second round of drinks, watch what you eat and are aware of the latest trends in sports nutrition and bike technology. But even the most well-meaning, self-sacrificing, smart triathletes can make nutrition mistakes that prevent them from reaching their body composition and performance goals. Avoid the following nutrition traps and your 2012 season will be better than you imagined.

MISTAKE #1: Not knowing your sweat rate. You know you should be conducting periodic "sweat tests" in training, right? Studies consistently show that even small (less than 2 percent) decreases in body weight due to fluid loss adversely affect performance. Don't let dehydration slow you down!

At least 2–3 times per training climate change (winter, spring, summer, fall), weigh yourself nude before and after a one-hour training session. Drink as usual and note intake. Multiply fluid weight loss by 16 (ounces/pound), and aim to drink that total number of fluid ounces/hour during future training sessions.

Sweat rate example: If you weigh 160 pounds pre-workout and 158.5 pounds post-workout, you lost 1.5 pounds from

sweat. Multiply 1.5 by 16 to get 24 ounces lost. Add, say, 10 ounces for fluid intake during your training session and you get 34 ounces/hour sweat rate.

MISTAKE #2: Inadequate calorie intake during training. I see triathletes make this mistake repeatedly, either to "save calories in an attempt to drop a few pounds," or to "practice going on empty." Studies show both mind-sets are completely backward. Take in 30–60 grams of carbs/hour (up to 80–90 grams/hour for Ironman athletes) to fuel your hardworking muscles and maximize your workout effort. Want to practice mental toughness? Do one of your 100-mile rides solo or train in less-than-ideal weather—don't train on empty. Bonus: Adequately fueling during training will also curb your hunger later, which translates to calories saved at the end of your day—a much smarter way to drop a body fat percentage point or two!

MISTAKE #3: Skipping post-workout fuel/meal. As athletes who often do daily double workouts, recovery is paramount not only to performance, but also to optimizing immunity and minimizing injury. Make it a priority to consume 2.2–2.6 grams of carbohydrate/pound body weight in the hour post-workout—even after late-evening workouts! Include some protein (and a pinch of salt) as well to help muscles repair and rebuild stronger. Wash it all down with some much-needed fluids.

MISTAKE #4: Misusing vitamins/supplements. Sure, we triathletes have higher daily calorie needs, but do we require vitamin supplementation? According to a recent panel of experts, maybe not. As a sports dietitian, I recommend supplementation when warranted, to correct dietary deficiencies in things such as calcium, vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids. Establish a solid daily nutrition foundation with real food first. Seek individualized advice as needed, and fill in any gaps with supplements if indicated. Supplements are not a "quick fix" for dietary insufficiencies.

MISTAKE #5: Relying too heavily on the number on the scale. It is not the lightest triathlete who performs the best; it's the strongest, healthiest one who trains consistently without injury or illness. Yes, losing excess body fat will help you improve performance, but constant under-fueling to achieve or maintain a super-lean body will not. Use body weight and body fat measurements as well as power output or other measurable results to best assess your "ideal weight." Need help? Seek advice from a certified sports dietitian who can test your body fat and resting metabolic rate to help you come up with a smart fueling and weight-loss plan. ①

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HEALTHY HABITS OF FIT TRIATHLETES

If you're struggling to reach your ideal race weight, try implementing these healthy habits this season. **BY PIP TAYLOR**

They read hunger signals.

To stay lean year-round, learn to eat when hungry and pass when full. This also means that you don't feel pangs of guilt for chowing down on seconds because you know when you need it. Athletes who constantly restrain themselves suffer more guilt and are more likely to have blowouts.

They sit down for meals.

As a busy athlete juggling three sports, it's easy to eat on the go all the time. Sit down to eat meals and switch off distractions to fully enjoy your food and be aware of exactly what (and how much) you're putting in your body.

They don't overestimate calories burned.

Many athletes overeat after a big workout because they think they can make up for a huge calorie expenditure. Try to only modestly increase intake to more accurately match training demands.

They are organized. Shop and stock your cupboards, fridge and emergency stash locations so you'll have less impulse eating and reliance on fast food or sugary hits. Have a plan for meals and snacks throughout the day.

They eat (healthy) fats.

Fat is satiating and essential for optimal health, functioning and energy. This means you should eat fatty foods such as salmon, nuts, olive oil and coconut oil.

They focus on themselves.

What your body needs is not what your colleague, training partner or spouse needs. Don't stack your plate next to theirs.

They sleep a lot. Calorie consumption increases when you are tired. Getting a full night's sleep will keep you on track.

They don't skip meals to lose weight.

Getting overly hungry will just raise cortisol (stress hormone) levels and make weight loss harder. Plus you are more likely to eventually break down and binge. Slow and steady is the rule for lasting weight loss.

They get enough protein.

Protein helps curb appetite and maintain muscle mass even when weight loss occurs. ①

