

Overhaul Your Nutrition

You devote a good deal of time to swimming, biking and running, but no amount of training can override a poor nutrition strategy—you've got to dial in your fueling to realize your true athletic potential. While specific nutritional needs may vary, many triathletes fit into one of these three 'types' of people who, despite best intentions, are making fueling mistakes that are sabotaging their race results. The fixes, though, are easier—and more rewarding—than you think.

By Lauren Antonucci





Are you this person? The scale-conscious under-eater

Mary, a 32-year-old triathlete, came to me, a sports dietitian and fellow Ironman triathlete, for help losing the last 5 pounds to improve her times across all distances. She had been trying to eat “clean” and dieting without success for months, and admitted that she thought about food throughout the day and was continually anxious about gaining weight.

Per my request, Mary kept a five-day food and exercise log, and I quickly noticed she was under-fueling during training sessions “to save calories and burn fat.” Along the same lines, her post-workout breakfast was inadequate in calories, carbs and fat. Honorably, she ate salads for lunch, snacked on fruits and yogurt, and ate mostly whole grains, but was hungry all day, and unable to control her eating before and after dinner. To accurately measure the number of calories she was burning each day, I tested Mary’s resting metabolic rate in my office. As expected, due to her muscle mass and training volume, Mary was burning 300 calories per day above predicted (for her height, weight, age and gender).

So why wasn’t the weight falling off? After assessing her food intake, training and metabolism, I informed Mary she had been under-fueling by 600 calories per day, which was causing her body to conserve fat. When I told her she needed to eat more to lose weight, she was rightfully both skeptical and optimistic. I increased Mary’s calorie intake by 200 calories a day each week, until she was meeting her needs. She began adequately fueling during and following workouts and reported more energy during training sessions, faster recovery and better overall mood. Mary was thrilled—and shocked—that her weight was finally coming down while consuming 600 additional calories daily! She is also greatly reducing her risk of illness and injury because she is now fueling her body adequately. As for her racing goals? She recently logged a personal best (by eight minutes) at an Olympic-distance triathlon.

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Are you this person?
 The carb junkie and serial snacker

Cheryl, a talented triathlete, came to see me because she was having trouble completing workouts and dealing with one injury after another. A self-described "candy monster and carb junkie," more than 50 percent of her total daily calories came from snacks like pretzels, crackers, frozen yogurt, sugary candy and fruits. Upon review of her food and training log, I was not surprised to see small meals inadequate in calories, protein and fat. She knew this needed to change, but couldn't make it happen. She was afraid she would still snack excessively and gain weight if she ate bigger meals.

I explained that her lack of energy was due to inadequate fueling, and that by increasing both her protein and "good" fat intake (three better, bigger, balanced

meals daily), she would also decrease both her cravings for sugar and injury risk. She was intrigued, receptive—and scared. I created a sample meal plan for her to follow, and increased each meal by 250–300 calories. I instructed Cheryl to choose 4–5 ounces of lean protein, two servings of complex carbohydrates, fruit or vegetable and good fat with each meal. I had her substitute mid-afternoon snacks with "mini-meals"; half a sand-

wich and fruit or oatmeal with nuts. I assured her it was all right, and necessary, for her to eat more at mealtime!

Two weeks later, Cheryl reported feeling more energetic all day and during workouts when following my plan. On days she accidentally reverted back to old habits, the carb and sugar cravings, overwhelming fatigue and guilt returned. One month later, Cheryl reported being injury-free, training harder and racing faster. She reported less anxiety when eating out, and a 90 percent reduction in carbohydrate and sugar cravings. Her coach, friends and co-workers all noticed her improved mood, energy and attitude. Cheryl couldn't believe she was able to maintain her weight while eating so much "real" food.

Are you this person?

The overly virtuous eater (yes, this is possible)

James is a competitive triathlete who came to see me earlier this year to find out if there were any tweaks I could recommend he make to his “already very healthy diet.” He reported increasing success in triathlons over the past five years as he continually cleaned up his diet and lost excess weight. Weighing in at 175 pounds five years ago, he came into my office at 5 feet 9 inches tall and 151 pounds. He said he was moderately happy with his weight, but thought he might podium more often if he could lose a few more pounds.

After reviewing his food and exercise log, I asked James if he ever let anything unhealthy touch his lips. To that he replied a very proud, “No! I have extremely good willpower and drive to succeed.” And while I was pleased to learn that he ate oatmeal with flax, chia seeds and berries each morning for breakfast; quinoa, beans, greens and avocado for lunch; and fish, sweet potato and vegetables daily for dinner, I was worried about his lack of variety and compelling need to eat 100 percent healthfully. When I asked about his snacking habits,

I was not surprised when he replied that he only snacked on fruits, nuts, hummus and whole-grain crackers. To my question regarding how he felt about dining out with friends, he replied that he tried to avoid it at all costs because “you never know what a restaurant does to your food.” I was concerned with James’ need to both control every bite and calorie that went into his mouth, as well as his complete refusal to eat anything that was not health food.

When I addressed my concern with James, he seemed surprised at first. He said he thought I would be impressed with his virtuous eating. When I explained that rigid adherence to a strict diet could be as unhealthy as eating poorly, he looked despondent but nodded his head in recognition. He then admitted that both his coach and wife had recently stated their concern for his extreme control over his eating.

Luckily, James was ready and willing to let go a bit. He admitted to wanting to go back to his favorite restaurant with his wife, and longed to eat an ice cream cone with his 8-year-old son. When I explained to him that doing both would actually be healthier for him than avoiding them forever, he looked relieved. Over the next several months we worked on increasing the number and types of foods he ate. Each week we set new goals, and each week he came back with big successes: He ate a meal out with his wife, enjoyed a sandwich prepared by his running partner, and went out for pizza with his son. And shockingly (to him), his triathlon season was going better than he ever imagined. His weight was up to 155 pounds, but his power on the bike had increased and he felt much stronger running hills. He PR’d in his last half-iron by 10 minutes and reported feeling much happier overall. He also said that he was more focused and productive at work.

James still eats healthy foods 90 percent of the time, but he proved to himself that allowing himself to eat less-than-perfect foods now and then is good for his triathlon career, mood and overall well-being. ❶

