If you are an avid cyclist who enjoys killer workouts, century rides, repeated days of exhaustive cycling (for example, a thirty-day TransAmerica zip-trip), and even high-speed bike commutes to and from work each day, you’ve undoubtedly noticed the plethora of commercial recovery foods that greet you in bike shops, convenience stores, and magazine ads. These engineered recovery bars, shakes, and beverages generally offer a combination of carbohydrates and protein while promising you optimal recovery.

But questions arise: How important are these items for avid cyclists? Can you simply eat standard foods around the campfire, in your kitchen, or at the local café, and get the same benefits? Yes, if you know what to eat. This article will help you refuel appropriately after a hard day’s effort without the added expense of special sports foods.

Who needs to worry about recovery?

If you are simply a fitness cyclist who usually rides three or four times a week for thirty to sixty minutes, don’t worry about recovery nutrition. Your body does not become depleted during fitness rides, plus you have plenty of time to refuel before your next exercise session.

If, however, you are a cyclist who exercises to exhaustion, a triathlete who does double workouts, or a weekend warrior who needs to recover rapidly from one exercise bout so you’ll be ready for the next, your recovery diet deserves full attention. You’ll be able to perform better during repeated days of hard exercise if you have planned ahead and have the right foods and fluids available to adequately replace carbohydrates, protein, fluids, calories, and sodium.

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates are essential to replenish depleted blood glucose and muscle glycogen stores and recover from the demands of strenuous riding. You should plan to consume carbohydrates as soon as you can after a hard ride — at least within thirty minutes of stopping. Because only carbohydrates can refuel your depleted muscles, think again if you are on an Atkins-type low-carb diet.

The trick to consuming enough carbs is to plan ahead and have the right foods and fluids readily available for frequent snacking. Otherwise, you may neglect your recovery diet by eating nothing — or mindlessly enjoying high-fat foods such as doughnuts, burgers, hot dogs, nachos, chips, and other fatty choices that fill your stomach but fail to optimally refuel your muscles with carbs.

Protein

Consuming a little protein along with the carbohydrates stimulates faster glycogen replacement. The protein also optimizes muscular repair and growth. Yes, you can buy commercial recovery foods such as Hammer Pro or Endurox R4, but you can just as easily and appropriately enjoy milk (on cereal or in a latte), fruit yogurt, a bagel with peanut butter, a sandwich, or any other snack or meal that offers a foundation of carbs accompanied by protein.

Fluids

If you’ve become very dehydrated (as indicated by scanty, dark urine), you may need twenty-four to forty-eight hours to totally replace your fluid loss. Because thirst is a poor indicator of whether you’ve had enough to drink, be sure to sip on enjoyable post-ride (non alcoholic) beverages until your urine is pale yellow (like lemonade), not dark and concentrated (like beer). You’ve consumed enough fluids if you are urinating every two to three hours.
four hours. Fruit juices, smoothies, and milk shakes are nutritious fluids that offer more health value than soda pop and sports drinks. Preventing dehydration during exercise is preferable to treating dehydration post-exercise. To determine your fluid needs, simply weigh yourself naked before and after an hour of hard riding during which you drank nothing. The weight loss reflects sweat loss. If you will be touring, be sure to calculate your sweat rate before leaving home while you have access to a scale. You can then develop a schedule for drinking adequate fluids during long rides to minimize sweat loss and hasten recovery. A two-pound-per-hour weight loss equals thirty-two ounces or one quart of fluid. This can be prevented by drinking eight ounces for every fifteen minutes that you ride.

**Calories**

If you are tired from a day-long biking adventure and arrive at your destination without a nutrition recovery plan, you might be tempted to flop into bed before you have consumed enough calories. Needless to say, a skimpy dinner will fail to replace depleted glycogen stores, and you'll feel the shortage the next day. The same goes for dieters who skimp on calories to lose weight.

One simple way to boost post-ride recovery calories is to quench your thirst by drinking high-calorie juices: cranberry, grape, or any other appealing blend. Juices provide the fluid and calories you need to replace what you’ve burned during the day. So, instead of guzzling water, just drink juice. It’s ninety-nine percent water and does the job of replacing lost fluids as well as calories.

Ideally, you’ve planned ahead for post-ride exhaustion and have an array of carbs readily available. Choose snacks such as yogurt, bagels, granola bars, and cold lemonade, as well as wholesome meals with a foundation of pasta, noodles, stuffing, couscous, or bread. If you lack the energy to prepare food, simply drink cranberry juice and/or chocolate milk by the quartful! They’ll boost your calorie and your carb intake. Other easy recovery foods include Instant Breakfast, canned meals (such as Boost), or fruit smoothies. All of these are excellent sources of carbs and fluids as well as a little protein.

**Sodium**

When you sweat, you lose some sodium (a component of salt). You are unlikely to deplete your body’s sodium supply unless you sweat hard for more than four to six hours and consume only water. Most riders easily replace sodium losses within the context of a standard American diet, which offers six to twelve times the amount of needed salt. A ham and cheese sandwich with a few chips or pickles can do the job!

If you eat primarily all natural or unprocessed foods (for example, all natural peanut butter sandwiches and fruit) and simultaneously add little or no salt to your meals, you might not consume enough sodium, which can hinder fluid retention. Salty foods, such as soup, pretzels, salted crackers, and table salt, are an appropriate part of a recovery diet for most healthy athletes.

**Sports drinks** are a weak source of sodium compared to munching on salty snacks. Eight ounces of Gatorade offers only 110 milligrams of sodium, and a half-ounce of pretzels offers 250 milligrams. You’ll be able to refuel and rehydrate better drinking fluids that are high in carbs, such as juices, and eating salty snacks. Have the sports drinks while you are exercising and have real foods and fluids afterwards.

**Rest**

Rest is an important part of any recovery. Your muscles need time to refuel and heal. You aren’t being lazy if you take a day off after a hard ride; you’re investing in your future performance. If you cannot take rest days because you have to ride hard day after day to arrive at your destination on time, be extra mindful of your sports diet and refuel well after each day’s adventure.

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