

LIQUID ASSETS

Cyclists and Engineered Sports Foods

by Nancy Clark MS RD CSSD

“Nancy, what do you think about Vitamin Water? ... Should I drink Gatorade with my lunch to help replace electrolytes? ... I sweat like a horse. Should I add electrolytes to my sports drink? ... What about Red Bull for a pre-ride energy booster? ... Do gels have ‘magic ingredients’ that will help me bike faster?” Questions abound about engineered sports foods! As a

cyclist, you undoubtedly get bombarded by ads for sports drinks, energy bars, electrolyte replacers, sports candies, and any of the plethora of commercial sports foods that can deplete your food budget. Are these engineered products a necessity, or just a convenience?

When cyclists ask for advice about how to use commercial sports foods, I first assess their daily sports diet to determine if they can get — or are getting — what they need from standard foods.

While cyclists who race might benefit from some of these products due to the high intensity exercise that limits intestinal function, most recreational and touring cyclists can get what they need, plus more, from standard foods. (Good thing, because specialty items may be hard to find when you are cycling in the middle of nowhere.) The purpose of this article is to help you become an informed consumer, so you know what these sports foods are, what they are not, and when to spend your money on them.

Electrolytes

One cyclist reported using electrolyte replacers throughout the day during the months he was training for a century ride. He then admitted he didn't even know what electrolytes are. I explained they are electrically charged particles, more commonly known as sodium, cal-

cium, magnesium, and potassium.

Standard foods abound with electrolytes; it's unlikely you have any need to worry about replacing them. As a long-distance cyclist, the more you eat to satisfy your appetite, the more electrolytes you consume.

Electrolytes	Sodium	Calcium	Magnesium	Potassium
Endurolytes (1 capsule)	40	50	25	25
Nuun, 1 tab	360	12	25	100
PB&J with milk	600	300	130	750
Pizza, 1 slice	650	200	30	220

Sports Drinks

After riding for more than 90 minutes, you should target about 200 to 300 calories per hour to maintain high energy and a pleasurable ride. A sports drink can be a convenient source of water plus energy (sugar), but water plus quality carbs (banana, bagel, granola bar) can also do the job.

Many cyclists believe the sodium in sports drinks is essential to replace the sodium lost in sweat. Wrong. Sports drinks actually offer far less sodium than what you consume in your meals — especially if the food is from the local diner or convenience store. There is no need for you to drink a sports drink with your lunch, because the sodium in the cheese sandwich and salted pretzels will

be far more than the small amount of sodium in the sports drink.

If you sweat heavily, you might lose about 1,000 to 3,000 milligrams of sodium in an hour of hard exercise. The chart below shows options for replacing these sodium losses.

Pre-ride energy bars

While buying a pre-ride energy bar and sports drink (\$2 to \$3) is one way to energize your workout, you could less expensively consume 300 calories of banana, yogurt, and water (\$1) or pretzels, raisins, and water (50¢). Any of these choices are carbohydrate-rich and will offer the fuel your muscles need to go the distance. You simply want a snack that digests easily, settles well in your stomach, and does not talk back to you. Standard supermarket foods do that as well as engi-

neered foods. There are no “magic ingredients” in energy bars.

Your job is to experi-

ment to determine what foods settle best in your body. You might decide that Nature Valley Granola Bars, Fig Newtons, PopTarts, or even a good ol' peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich do the job — and taste better — at a fraction of the price.

Caffeine

Whether your incentive to get out of your tent is the campfire cup o' Joe or a stop at Starbucks, coffee is known to be a cyclists' best friend. Caffeine is a proven “ergogenic aid” that enhances performance by making the effort seem easier. A pre-ride caffeine-fix — especially if accompanied by carbs — can energize your workout. Do you need a caffeinated Red Bull to do the job? Or “Buzz Bites” energy chew? Doubtful. The following chart shows how the options compare.

Caffeine	mg	Cost
Coca-Cola, 20 oz	60	\$1.59
Red Bull, 8-oz	80	\$2.19
Buzz Bite	100	\$0.65
No-doz, 1 tablet	200	\$0.33
Starbuck's, 16 oz	300	\$1.94

Energy Drinks

Energy drinks such as Red Bull, AMP, Full Throttle, and Monster have powerful names and are popular among the 20- to 40-year-old crowd. While some of these folks use the drinks for a pre-ride energy booster, others use them for alcohol mixers. Their sweetness masks the taste of the alcohol, but the resulting problem is a wide-awake drunk who may think he can drive himself home — but then gets into an accident.

For cyclists, energy drinks are the source of enough sugar and caffeine to give you a quick energy boost. But the problem remains: why do you need a quick fix in the first place? By eating a proper breakfast, regular snacks and adequate meals on a schedule, you can prevent the need for quick energy — and ride well. One Red Bull will not compensate for inadequate food intake.

Remember: If you can make the time to ride your bike, you can also make the time to fuel appropriately for the ride. As one coach remarked, “Why bother to show up for the ride if you are poorly fueled?”

Sports foods enriched with B-vitamins

Many engineered sports drinks, bars, and gels claim they are enriched with B

vitamins “for energy.” Yes, B vitamins are needed to convert food into energy, but they are not sources of energy. You do not need to consume gels with B-vitamins while exercising, because your body has a supply of vitamins stored in your liver. You are unlikely to become deficient during exercise.

Vitamin Water

I often see cyclists stop at a convenience store and select Vitamin Water for their beverage of choice. They fail to realize that all-natural orange juice is the better source of “vitamin water.” That is, 8 ounces of orange juice offers 100 percent of the daily value for Vitamin C, whereas 8 ounces of Energy Tropical Citrus Vitamin Water offers only 40 percent. Plus, the orange juice offers abundant potassium, as well as folate, fiber, phytochemicals, and a myriad of health-protective nutrients that are not in engineered foods. When you drink 16 ounces — or the whole quart because you are thirsty — you get double or quadruple the recommended intake of vitamin C. Exercise does not delete vitamins, so you end up ahead of the game.

Sports Candy

Some cyclists munch on Sports Beans for an afternoon snack. That's an expensive source of calories! (\$1/packet, 100 calories.) Like sports drinks, sports beans are designed to be taken during exercise. Regular jellybeans would be a far less expensive snack! Raisins, dried pineapple, or grapes would make a healthier snack option. If you are craving salt, then add a few pretzels or baked chips to the mix.

So what's a hungry cyclist to do?

If money is not an issue and if you enjoy the taste and convenience of commercial sports foods, be my guest. But also know that standard foods can do the job. Research on a simulated three-day adventure race suggests standard foods are more palatable in the long run (er, long ride). When adventure racers were given a buffet of fueling options during this simulated event, 86 percent of their calories came from supermarket foods (candy, pizza, sandwiches, soft drinks, coffee, bananas, etc.) as opposed

Engineered products	Sodium (mg)
Endurolytes, 1 capsule	40
PowerBar Electrolytes, 8 oz.	65
Gatorade, 8 oz.	110
Gatorade Endurance, 8 oz.	200

Standard foods	Sodium (mg)
Cheese stick, 1 oz	200
Pizza, 1 slice	500
Salt, 1/4 teaspoon	600
Ramen noodles	1,500

to only 14 percent from engineered sports foods (sports drinks, gels, energy bars, protein bars). As an educated consumer, you might want to follow the same path. **AC**

Nancy Clark is a certified specialist in sports dietetics, a former TransAmerica tour leader, and counsels active people in her practice at Healthworks, the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Her Sports Nutrition Guidebook and Cyclist's Food Guides are available on www.nancyclarkrd.com.



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