

Food for thought – eating by colour

Just recently, I heard Boris Becker talking about Ivan Lendl in the context of Lendl's role as Andy Murray's coach. Becker described Lendl as the first professional athlete with 'discipline' and cited Lendl's attention to diet as a demonstration of this professionalism. The implication was clear – only the top professional athletes would pay attention to their diet.

Maybe things have moved on since the peak of Lendl's and Becker's careers in the 1980's, I certainly hope so. I'm sure that, as runners, we're all aware of the need for plenty of carbs, but what about the remainder of our diet? Perhaps racing and training are analogous to taking a trip in the car: yes, of course we'll need to fill up with petrol / diesel but we should also check the oil and water under the bonnet, as well as being confident that all the electrics are working correctly.

Carbohydrate is our fuel but we also need to ensure that we have an adequate intake of other nutrients. Protein is important for repair and recovery but it's the so-called micronutrients in our diet that can easily be forgotten, rather like checking oil and water under the car bonnet. We need a balanced intake of vitamins and minerals to ensure that our bodies work effectively and efficiently at the micro and macro levels. We can carry on for quite a while on less than optimum levels of vitamins and minerals, but sooner or later something will go wrong; or maybe it won't actually 'go wrong' in the sense of a total breakdown but we'll be trying to perform when our bodies are struggling to function optimally whilst deficient in something that needs to be working better at the biochemical level.

Whilst the benefits of regular exercise cannot be over-stated, it's worth remembering that training hard increases physiological stress levels in the body. What can this mean in practice? Being stressed in this way will compromise the functioning of the immune system, i.e. our defence against infection and our mechanism for healing. The result may be an upset of the delicate balance between benefit in terms of fitness and performance versus the negative impact of increased susceptibility to infection.

How many times have you heard a fellow runner say that their training for a target race was right on schedule until the week beforehand, when they went down with a stinking cold?

So how should we minimise the risk of a 'breakdown on the motorway' en route to that important race? The answer is to ensure that you have a balanced diet, and not just in pre-race week!

We are inundated with 'healthy eating' messages, such as '5 a day', and bombarded with advertisements for supplements and substitutes that can be added to our diets. Bear in mind that the widely broadcast healthy eating messages are aimed at the population as a whole. If you're a club or independent runner, you're not

representative of the average person in the UK. You're ahead of the game in that you take regular exercise (in many cases, lots of it) but this also means that your body demands a greater level of certain nutrients in order to support all that activity.

If we look at just one of these messages, 5 a day, referring to portions of fruit and vegetables it is the case that we, as runners, should be thinking of 8 a day as being desirable. Now, just to be clear, chips, roasties and even jacket potatoes don't count as vegetable portions in this context (they count as starch, i.e. carbohydrate).

The secret to getting the most out of your 8 portions is variety; if you already eat 5 bananas a day don't just increase that to 8 ! A detailed survey of the composition of a range of fruits and vegetables will show you that different vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals (good plant substances such as antioxidants) occur in different foods.

It's not reasonable to go out to the supermarket with that sort of information in your head but, fortunately, there is a very simple short cut: to shop by colour. If you select a variety of different coloured fruits and vegetables, you are highly likely to get a really good mix of nutrients. So, dark green leaves, carrots, onions, tomatoes, berry fruits, apples and bananas will complement each other and, if you can manage to eat all of those in one day, that's 7 portions right away!

This sort of multi-coloured diet will help you to obtain the micro-nutrients (vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals) that are needed to support a really healthy physiology and to give your body the best chance of managing the stresses that you place on it by exercising, and of fighting the infectious agents that you will inevitably meet along the way. And, to have the best chance of getting to that important race without falling victim to a simple cold that could make the difference between just finishing the race and getting a pb.

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