

## Food for thought – carbs or fat?

Which is the best source of energy for runners – carbs or fat?

As with so many apparently simple questions, the answer is: well, it depends... We're all runners yet the answer for you depends upon your situation and your aims. The following runners and their specific aims are fictitious and any resemblance to runners whom you know is purely coincidental!

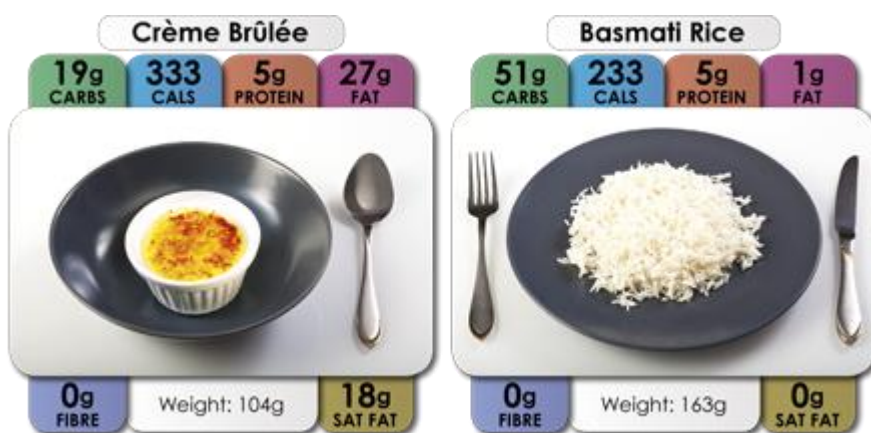
Aaron races regularly, primarily 10K's, and knows that he burns up energy so he wants to know what's best for fuelling before his race and for recovery afterwards. Yes, the answer is carbs.

Bernard is training for a marathon and has been reading all about fat-burning. He knows that his marathon pace, and his heart rate, will be less than his usual 10K performance and his research tells him that he'll be burning proportionally more fat and less carbs in the marathon race. Should he adopt a higher fat diet within his training regime? Now, this is an interesting one because it has been shown scientifically that consuming a high fat diet during training will increase the fat-burning rate during a long race. In the scientific study, this observation didn't translate into improved performance however, so it won't help Bernard to attain his target time. Should he add a source of fat to his race nutrition plan? Whilst this seems a logical way to fuel the fat-burning, the answer is no. Fats take far longer to digest and to convert into energy than do the quick release forms of carbs that he will have in his race nutrition, i.e. the simple sugars, primarily glucose, found in sports drinks and gels.

Cerys has started running to get fit and wants to reduce to a more healthy weight. She definitely wants to maximise her fat-burning capability and she is also interested to hear that a higher fat diet might help her to do this. Cerys runs at a relatively gentle pace and, yes, she will be burning fat as well as carbs during her runs. A higher fat diet is not the answer, however, if weight loss is the objective. Fats contain more than twice the number of calories, gram for gram, than carbs do. Fatty foods also tend to be rather less satiating than carbs (i.e. they fill you up less) so Cerys will tend to get hungry sooner on a higher fat diet, despite taking in more calories.

Duncan has decided to try a duo-athlon this year. He is a seasoned runner, with some fast times under his belt and some target races planned for this year, but he finds that it takes him a long time to recover from the duo-athlon events although neither the run nor the cycle stage is particularly long. He is beginning to think that he needs to increase his energy intake, somehow. The initial answer for Duncan is to increase his carb intake before and after his duo-athlon events. Duncan says that he struggles to eat a large meal after a duo-athlon, as he really has no appetite. This is not unusual, as following longer events appetite is often depressed, which is really perverse as that's when we badly need to re-fuel. After a long event is the time when a meal with a higher fat content is a useful means of taking on board plenty of energy (calories) in a shorter period.

Evie races regularly and has had some good age-graded results. She has increased her training sessions recently, in terms of frequency and intensity and although she's pleased with her progress she is finding it very hard to remain motivated because she often feels lethargic during the training week. Evie has the 'racing-snake' physique that others may long for and although she says that she's not watching her weight she doesn't want it to increase as that would impact her performance. It sounds as if Evie might need to increase her energy intake to fuel the extra training and to ensure that she recovers in time for her races. Again, increasing carbs is advised but Evie complains of feeling too full and starts to experience some unwanted gastro-intestinal effects. This situation is another case for increasing fat intake, by means of higher fat meals, to provide the calorie boost during the training week.



Carbs or fat? It really does depend upon your situation and your targets.

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