

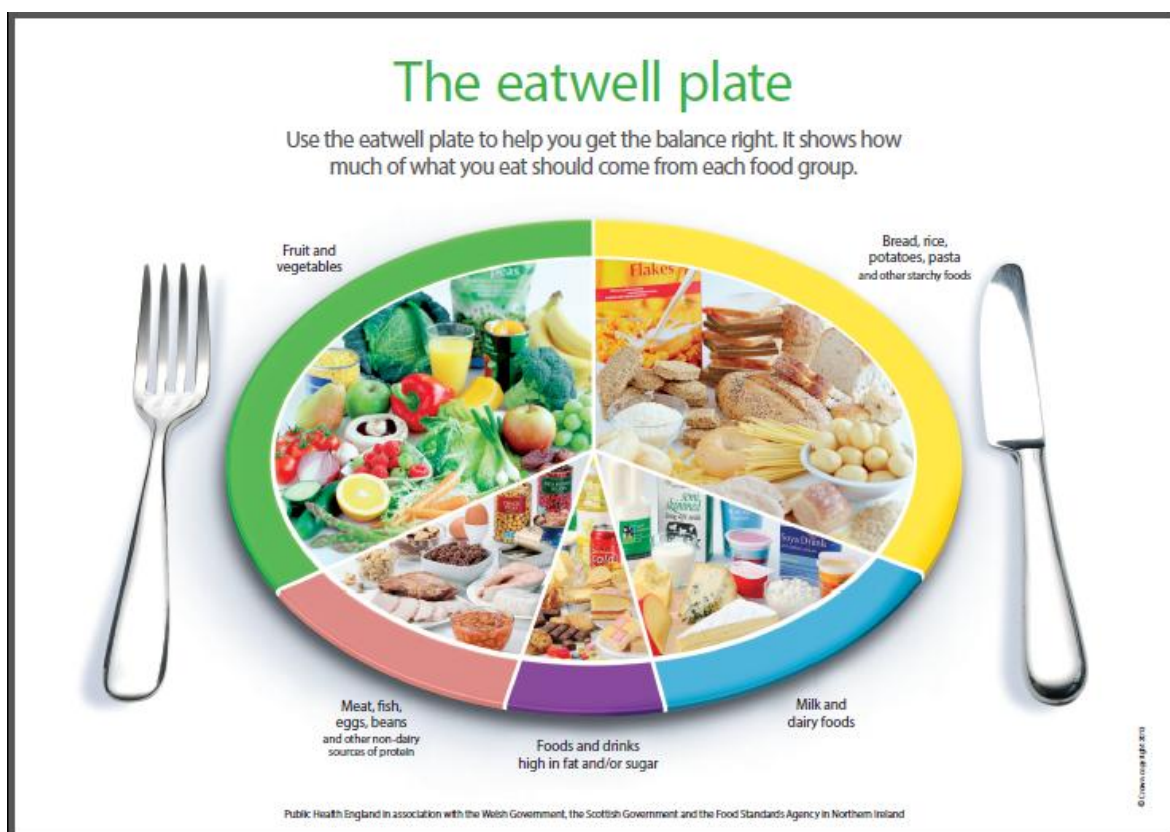
## Food for thought – back to basics

Within the last few weeks I've been invited to talk about nutrition with two marathon groups. I was delighted to accept both invitations because I suspect that nutrition considerations are usually a long way down the list of things that are on the mind of a runner; coming in behind training schedule, injury treatment and/or prevention, cross-training, choice of race(s), shoes, etc.

I opened both sessions with consideration of a balanced diet as the essential basis for all running training and racing. This is a risky strategy, I know, as some (many?) people may feel that they've heard it all before. If I were to challenge: 'how many calories do you need per day?' or 'how many calories do you use during your run?' many established runners would have the answer at their fingertips, or on their Garmin-clad wrist. (Other exercise monitoring apps are available!)

If I were to ask, 'what does a calorie look like?' I suspect that far fewer would answer with confidence. That confidence might also be misplaced, as a calorie is a unit of energy.

A balanced diet is not just about calories. Obviously, too many calories will lead to weight gain and too few will result in weight loss, that's simple arithmetic, but in the longer term, the source of those calories will influence the overall quality of your diet and the true nutritional value.



Ideally we should be aiming for 50% of our calories being provided by carbohydrates, 35% by fats and 15% by protein. That really isn't very helpful, when we can't visualise those calories to start with but there's a useful Public Health England graphic known as the eatwell plate which is essentially a pie chart (no pun intended).

This chart shows the relative quantities of food types we should consume in a day, and preferably in each individual meal: one third complex carbohydrates, one third vegetables & fruit and the final third made up of protein, dairy and sweet or high fat processed foods such as cakes, crisps and fizzy drinks.

The eatwell plate gives us the 50/35/15 split because we don't eat pure sources of carbs, fats and protein, instead we eat foods that are composed of two or more of these; and also, importantly, it gives us the essential vitamins and minerals that are spread throughout our food but have no calorific value.

When we step up the training, whether in intensity or mileage, we need to increase calorie intake in order to provide the additional fuel for running and for recovery. The best strategy is to increase the total amount of carbs in the diet and this will increase the proportion of total calories obtained from carbs; this is a good thing to do as it is carbs that are utilised as an increased proportion of our fuel as we run faster. One of the objectives of training is to optimise the body's use of glycogen (i.e. carbohydrate) whilst running and to maximise its replenishment during recovery.

It's easy to talk about carbs and protein, about vitamins and fats, but it is essential that everyone is speaking the same language. Within a balanced diet, complex carbs will be provided by the familiar grain-based breads and pasta, by grains and seeds such as rice, couscous, quinoa, oats and barley, and by root vegetables. Sugars in fruit and fruit juices are also carbs, albeit they are less complex and more readily digested. For most of us, the primary sources of protein are meat, fish and eggs (these are 'complete' proteins that provide all the essential amino acids) but grains and seeds, pulses, nuts and dairy products also contain varying amounts of protein.

Rarely does anyone talk about needing to get enough fats because fats are widespread in our diet. We would all recognise butter and vegetable oils as primary sources of fats but don't forget animal proteins, nuts and dairy as sources of fats too. Last but not least, what about the cakes and biscuits, crisps and savouries? They are packed full of sugars and fats, which is one reason why we're generally not short of either!

A balanced diet is an essential base for training and it is one that contains the proportions of food groups shown on the eatwell plate. By following this pattern, you will also limit the amount of highly processed food in your regular diet, which is a health bonus!

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