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Food and Sleep

Article by Pete James

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Food and sleep issues can be separated into three distinct areas:

- Pre-race
- Short Race
- Long Race
- Pre-race Preparation

Whatever length race you are participating in, the emphasis is on arriving at the start-line organised and ready, in the best physical state possible. However, travel, the organisation of kit and food, team-mates living in different cities (or countries), work and home commitments often work against you in your preparation.



Hence, ensure that you allocate an evening (or weekend, if you are entering a long race, particularly your first) in advance to pack your kit. Losing sleep the night before the race is actually less crucial than getting a good sleep the night before that. So, if you're racing on a Saturday, a good strategy would be to pack Wednesday night, leave Thursday as a relaxed evening and an early night, and travel on Friday (perhaps having to stay up late). For an important race a long way from home, consider taking that extra day off and arriving fresh.

Try and stick to a regular eating and sleeping routine in the lead up to the race. The night before the race, eat well and end early. It's important to have something enjoyable and filling, but in general, something with plenty of carbohydrate in (e.g. pasta) is a good bet. Don't skip dessert – you will need all the calories you can get. 

If you have to travel to the start line from a race headquarters, make sure you use the time to rest and hydrate as much as possible rather than squandering the time chatting.

On the morning of the race, try and finish eating about one and a half hours before you start. Pre-race hydration is very important, so carry a bottle with you, sipping regularly until 30 minutes before the start.

Short Race Nutrition

Eating in a short race can be a very simple affair: for a 3 hour race two gels may be a sensible amount to consume. Much more and your body will struggle to digest what you're eating. Liquid intake can vary considerably with the temperature and activities, but two or three litres of isotonic drink will probably be plenty.

For a longer multi-hour race you need to think a bit harder about food. Have some "real" food available. Nuts, crisps and the humble cheese and tomato sandwich may become increasingly appealing the longer you race on sweet food like energy bars and gels. Try to eat something different in transitions. One simple rule of thumb is to eat something (e.g. a bar) every hour.

Eating during Long Races

An expedition length race introduces many new factors:

- The weight of the food and drink that you carry becomes significant, so try to use more dehydrated food and pick up water on route if possible (using purifying tablets to avoid illness)
- Your body will start to crave more fat and protein, salty and "real" foods – have them ready
- It is almost impossible to consume enough calories to match your energy output
- Try to eat a lot in transitions – "real" (heavy) food that you can't justify carrying. Cold tins of pasta or vegetable curry may suddenly taste very good.
- You need to be able to do a lot of your eating and drinking on the move to maintain a good average speed.



Sleep Strategies during Long Races

Balance time spent not progressing over the course with the need to function (trek, bike, navigate etc), and therefore the need to sleep. For a two-day race you might go right through without a break, or consider a 20 minute cat nap if you are all tired at the same time.

Bear in mind that you will generally go through phases of feeling particularly sleepy, but then come good again.

For a race over four days in length consider sleeping about 2 hours a night. There are numerous approaches as to when to take this sleep, but you need to be adaptable to the opportunities available. Try to avoid sleeping in really cold/wet conditions by making the most of a good bivvy spot when you do find it. Transition areas are generally not ideal for sleeping due to the noise and distractions, but in a harsh environment, they may still be your best bet.

In the lead up to the race there may seem to be an impossible number of tasks to fulfil. Schedule in regular breaks for meals and sleep since this will ensure you are

efficient, focused and relaxed.

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