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This Is What Happens When You Don't Eat Enough After Working Out



If you're a regular exerciser, it's important to understand what happens when you don't eat enough after you work out. Most dietitians recommend eating something within 30 minutes after a workout. Your body, after using up its available energy, needs to be refueled, specifically with carbs and protein, for energy and to repair the microdamage that exercise does to your muscles.

We're all busy, though. And sometimes, fitting in a workout means squeezing it into a quick 30-minute window and then rushing off to the next obligation. If you don't have a protein bar or other handy snack packed, getting those nutrients in may not actually happen. But if skipping a post-workout nosh becomes a habit, you risk compromising your fitness goals, and also just feeling crummy. Here's what happens when you don't eat enough after you exercise and why you should not be skipping meals, especially on days you work out.

Skipping post-workout refueling can leave you feeling tired and foggy, and can get in the way of recovery.

"Some people will just feel fatigue, and some people can get disoriented from low blood sugar," Jennifer Beck, M.D., sports medicine specialist and pediatric orthopedist at UCLA, tells SELF. She also notes that ignoring post-workout steps that are essential for recovery, like proper nutrition, can contribute to overuse injuries. "We think a lot of overuse injuries happen when people are not replacing essential building blocks as readily as they should," Beck says. This can especially become a problem if you're doing heavy muscle-building activities and neglecting what your body needs to repair microtears and damage. Fixing those tears is how your body builds muscle; failing to do so puts your muscles at risk of further damage next time you work out.

Go for snacks or meals that have both carbs and protein.

Sweet potatoes with Greek yogurt, toast with almond butter, and veggie omelets are all great for post-workout snacks (and work for fueling up pre-workout, too!) This roundup is a great place to start. A piece of fruit or crackers for carbs with Greek yogurt, turkey, or nut butter for protein are all great ideas, too.

After particularly sweaty or long workouts, you might need to replenish electrolytes, too.

Food also contains electrolytes, minerals our bodies need to keep the muscles and nerves firing correctly. "If you had a very sweaty workout, replacing calcium, salt, and potassium, all part of standard food consumption, is also very important," says Beck. If you tend to get super sweaty, or you're working out on a hot day or going for a long training run, you'll lose some of these things in your sweat. If you're not able to immediately replace them, it can make you feel terrible and can even be dangerous. Dehydration and hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) can both set in quickly and make you feel disoriented or even pass out. In rare cases, lack of electrolytes can throw off the electrical impulses that keep the heart beating properly, leading to cardiac arrhythmia, or irregular heartbeat.

Never overlook good ol' fashioned hydration.

If you're going to remember one thing, though, make it water. "Water is the most important building block you need after a workout," Beck says. And during, for that matter. While extra long or hard workouts will require replenishing those electrolytes, recovering from just about any kind of workout goes way better if you've been staying hydrated.

Skipping a post-workout meal every once in a while isn't a huge deal, but try not to make it a habit, especially after intense workouts. "You want to set yourself up for good patterns," Beck says, because developing healthy habits is the easiest way to prevent burnout and injury. Exercise should be fun and bring you positive health benefits, not end in muscle tears or stress fractures. "Both hydration and nutrition are important parts of having healthy exercise habits."

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