

# Pro Team Protein!

## In Defense of the Endurance Athlete's Forgotten Nutrient

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As a certified fitness trainer and coach, I've reviewed my share of food journals over the years; ranging from obese and sedentary clients to elite athletes and bodybuilders. The following is a recent submission that I received from a competitive female swimmer and distance runner.

Breakfast: Oatmeal with raisins and a glass of orange juice. Lunch: Salad (lettuce, tomato, carrots and celery) with low fat ranch dressing, a buttered roll and a glass of water. Dinner: Pasta with mushrooms, Alfredo sauce and a glass of white wine.

Since most of the foods listed are generally healthy, my problem with her menu has less to do with what she actually consumed than what she consistently omitted: protein! And if your food diary looks anything like hers, than you too could be missing out on this key nutrient and stunting your progress.

Don't worry, it's not entirely your fault; truth be told, most of us have an oversimplified working knowledge of the nutrients that we put into our systems. Proteins are known for building muscle and carbohydrates are known for providing energy so bodybuilders should eat protein and endurance athletes should eat carbs; the end. Right?

In actuality, this school of thought couldn't be any further from the truth. Despite what Professor Atkins might say, a competitive bodybuilder can not merely load up on steak and bacon all day and you, my friend, will need to consume more than just gel and granola each day if you seriously expect to light up the race course this year.

Most nutrition articles for endurance athletes solely focus on fruits, vegetables and carbohydrates and I agree that these are all essential elements that you should incorporate into your daily routine. What many of these articles tend to overlook however, is that proteins are also extremely valuable for regulating your metabolic rate, lowering blood sugar levels, muscle repair and sustained energy.

Yes, you read that correctly, proteins are also one of your energy sources! Okay, I knew that would get your attention, but before you rip open that cottage cheese container, let me first provide a quick lesson on how this all works.

Through digestion, proteins are broken down to amino acids and distributed throughout the body for growth and maintenance of body tissue. Excess amino acids not needed for these functions however are used as fuel, but only if an adequate amount of carbohydrates and essential fats have also been consumed to meet energy demands.

Hopefully I didn't lose you there. Technical nerd terms aside, here are the two takeaways from that last paragraph.

First, proteins are vital for maintaining body tissue. Think of all of the miles you've rode, swam or ran last year and you can imagine

the wear and tear that has affected your body during that time. You can't keep breaking those muscle fibers down without giving your body the adequate tools to rebuild them. You wouldn't ignore that kind of damage to your bike and you wouldn't do that to your car so why would you do that to your body?

Secondly, you will only benefit from the sustained energy that protein provides if you have also consumed an adequate amount of carbohydrates and essential fats.

Many endurance athletes, especially female distance runners (sorry ladies, just stating the facts!); mistakenly believe that they should consume as little food as possible each day so they can become lighter and faster. The counterpoint to this school of thought is that it's better to be lean and strong than to just be light and emaciated. Trust me, that extra strength is going to come in handy when you encounter hills, start to fatigue and as you charge towards the finish line!

So how much and how often should you consume protein? Most research recommends a range of .55 grams per pound of body weight each day for females and .8 grams per pound of body weight each day for males. For example, a 150lb athlete would require 80 to 120 grams of protein per day ( $150 \times .55 = 80$  grams for females/  $150 \times .8 = 120$  grams for males). Of course, this is merely an estimate, so for more specific guidance, you might want to consult with a registered dietician or nutritionist.

Once you've determined your daily protein requirements however, you'll want to spread those grams over 5 or 6 meals to be consumed every two to three hours with an emphasis on breakfast and even more importantly, on your post workout meal.

A high quality protein shake within 30 minutes of working out, followed by a balanced meal containing whole foods within 90 minutes is ideal for optimum recovery.

As you incorporate more protein into your diet, make sure to stay hydrated to avoid cramping. You may also want to forgo large quantities of protein on mornings before races; however for the rest of your meals, especially on training days, you should aim to incorporate all of the essential nutrients. Because if you want to start taking your race times to the next level this year, no longer can you simply focus on fueling the tank without first making repairs to the engine!



*Darrell W. Butler has trained, managed and consulted for fitness centers and media outlets around the world. When he's not training a client or sharing his words of wisdom, you can catch him drinking a PFC Berries A'More Recovery Shake at his local gym's juice bar! For more information visit the Darrell Butler Personal Training website at [www.dbptonline.com](http://www.dbptonline.com)*

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