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Your new fuel rules

We runners like following the rules. We do as our training schedules dictate, hoping to add precious speed and shave precious seconds. We replace our shoes every 500 miles, hoping to avoid injury. But in a sport that attracts its share of control freaks (or does it just send us that way?), we often fail to control one of the most important factors in determining our performance – what we put in our mouths.

Proper nutrition and hydration are critical components of better running. However, many of us are still either playing the fuelling game by an antiquated rulebook or chasing after the latest fads, such as eliminating gluten.

And while many of these strategies may have their place in the runner's diet, there's a lot

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In the spirit of keeping things simple, we've scoured the research and quizzed the experts to narrow your nutritional strategy down to five basic commandments that will give your body what it needs to run and race better.

1. Eat carbs and choose them wisely

While the scientists carry on trying to work out whether endurance athletes can teach their bodies to oxidise more fat as fuel, the truth remains that carbohydrates, stored as glycogen, are the best and most readily available form of energy for muscle strength and endurance – and runners need carbohydrates to perform and recover.

How much of your diet to devote to carbohydrates depends on you, and where you are in your training cycle. For somebody who is in a low or moderate-mileage phase, nutritionists prescribe three grams per kilogram of body weight. As your training volume increases, increase that to five or six grams per kilogram of bodyweight per day.

The trick, though, is to choose the form of those carbohydrates well. Carbs have had a bad press over the years because most people associated them with white breads, pasta and refined grains – many of which also contain refined sugars and/or saturated fat. But fruits and vegetables, as well as wholegrains, also count as carbs, and those are the kind runners should gravitate towards.

"You can pick a piece of fruit or you can pick a box of crackers," says Stephanie Howe, an elite ultra runner who is also working on her doctorate in nutrition and sports science.

"The carb content may look the same, but the apple is also going to give you essential vitamins and minerals."

As for pre-race carb-loading, it really only helps for those who are running marathons or

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When it's race time, switch to a different kind of carb to sidestep the dreaded 'wall'. Trent Stellingwerff, innovation and research physiology lead at the Canadian Sport Institute, advises feeding the body easily digested carbohydrates such as gels and sports drinks during racing or prolonged exercise. "Simple sugars like sucrose and fructose are the way to go," he says.

And how about the increasingly popular tactic of 'fasted training' (deliberately running with depleted carb stores to force your body to adapt and burn more fat as fuel)?

The scientific jury is still out, but many experts don't recommend it except as a last resort in the training arsenal – most runners could see performance improvement by adding other simple stresses for the body to adapt to, like increasing mileage, instead of toying with fuel depletion.

Bottom line

Runners need carbohydrates, but should be careful in choosing the healthiest versions and not overdoing their intake. Science does not yet fully support the notion that most runners will benefit from depletion runs, but those who try them should pick a safe time in the training cycle to allow proper recovery.

2. The recovery window

Coaches and sports nutritionists have been harping on about it for years, but does the 30-minute to 90-minute eating window to maximise recovery genuinely exist? Well, it does if you want your body to quickly absorb and use nutrients to repair muscles and replenish your fuel stores.

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about 250kcal – will help replenish what a runner has lost, but it may not be as important as merely eating something.

And while many recovery food fads come and go, nobody has yet found a mystical perfect source of recovery fuel. “Usually your appetite is suppressed after a race or a training session, so I say that anything you can get down is good, whether it’s a sports drink, a bar or a peanut butter sandwich,” says Howe. “There’s no magic superfood out there. There are a variety of foods that will get you the nutrients you need.”

Bottom line

After hard training and racing efforts, jump-start the recovery process by eating or drinking 200-300kcal of 3-4g:1g of carbs to protein, up to 90 minutes post-exercise. Choose whole foods when possible.

3. Eat real food

Although the sports nutrition experts don’t agree on everything, there’s one piece of diet advice they prescribe time and again: eat more fruit and vegetables, every single day.

“We spend a lot of time talking about ratios – runners have basic needs for calories and fluids, but how you get those calories makes a huge difference,” says Jay Sutcliffe, associate clinical professor of health sciences at Northern Arizona University in the US, and nutrition advisor to the university’s running teams.

“Typically, we see a lack of micronutrients in the diet that provide the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and coenzymes to help build the mitochondria.”

We need to feed these mitochondria because they are the little cellular powerhouses that

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magnesium (helps reduce muscle cramps) and flavonoid antioxidants (anti-inflammatory).

Bottom line

Fuel performance by focusing on quality foods, including lean protein (fish, eggs, poultry), wholegrains (brown rice, barley, quinoa, whole oats), legumes (beans, lentils), fruits, vegetables and healthy fats (nuts, avocados, seeds, oily fish).

4. Take it easy with electrolytes

The sports industry has done a great job of convincing us that we need electrolytes to perform better. And we do – just not as much as we think. “There’s a lot of marketing going into the importance of electrolytes, and it’s sometimes overstated,” says nutrition consultant Kyle Pfaffenbach.

The biggest concern about the loss of electrolytes – sodium, potassium, magnesium and calcium – comes when you’re training or racing for two to three hours or more. When running for that long and losing electrolytes through sweat, there is certainly a need to replace them with gels or sports drinks. Nutritionists recommend 0.5g to 0.7g of sodium per litre of fluids.

“It’s almost the same as your thirst mechanism. Your body tells you when it’s thirsty,” says Alicia Shay, nutrition advisor at the Hypo2 High Performance Sport Center. “If you’re craving salt, you need it – but don’t take it blindly.”

As for hydration, the advice is still pretty basic. In terms of post-run rehydration, Stellingwerff suggests conducting the old sweat test to work out how much fluid you’re

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hour. And how much should you drink during a race? Even simpler: drink when you feel you need to.

Bottom line

Electrolyte replacement is most important for long efforts and/or particularly warm weather. However, don't take in electrolytes blindly – keep tabs on how much you're ingesting.

5. Elimination diets wont improve your performance

Spend an afternoon reading a variety of runners' blogs out there and you'll find that the 'secret' to success is obviously eliminating wheat, barley, rye, grains, legumes, dairy, salt, oils... the list goes on. More commonly known by labels such as 'gluten-free' and 'Paleo' diets; their advocates say that ridding themselves of one food group or another has propelled them to running greatness.

"It's a huge pet peeve of mine," says Shay. "People read this stuff, replicate it and think it's somehow scientifically proven to help them run better. But it's not rooted in evidence."

With the exception of coeliac disease and diagnosed food allergies, there's little science backing claims that cutting gluten or following a diet that prescribes an overabundance of fat and protein will help performance – in fact, because science has proven that endurance athletes need carbs, overdoing the fat and protein just may hinder it.

One potential upside is that these diets may force a runner to cut down on foods such as biscuits and crisps, says Howe. For those who don't have coeliac disease or allergies and still claim to feel better after eliminating gluten, it's probably because they're eating more

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Science doesn't support the claim that eliminating food groups can boost running performance, unless a runner has diagnosed allergies.

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