

TOP 5 TIPS FOR PLANT-BASED ATHLETES

Dr Leila Dehghan, MD, MSc, ANutr

1 EAT ENOUGH CALORIES

Any increase in physical activity will raise your energy expenditure. That is why the first priority of any athlete should be to consume enough calories to make sure to meet this increased energy demand. This is an even greater concern for vegan athletes since plant-based foods tend to be less calorie-dense than foods consisting of animal products. To avoid falling into the trap of eating too little, you should determine your daily calorie requirements using the Harris Benedict equation. This is done by multiplying your basal metabolic rate with your level of physical activity.

Once you know your required calorie intake, keep track of your food intake using an app like Cronometer for a few days. This will help you to know how much you must eat in a day to meet your caloric needs for your chosen sport.

Harris Benedict equation

Men:

$BMR = 66.5 + (13.76 \times \text{weight in kg}) + (5.003 \times \text{height in cm}) - (6.755 \times \text{age in years})$

Women:

$BMR = 655 + (9.563 \times \text{weight in kg}) + (1.850 \times \text{height in cm}) - (4.676 \times \text{age in years})$

Inactive: PA < 1.4

Sedentary: PA = 1.4 - 1.69

Moderately active: PA = 1.70 - 1.99

Vigorously active: PA = 2 - 2.4

Extremely active: PA > 2.4



2 MIND YOUR MICRO NUTRIENTS, NOT JUST MACROS

While it's important to consume an adequate amount of macronutrients such as carbohydrates, fats, and proteins at the right time to meet your caloric demands athletes need to also pay attention to their intake of micronutrients, including vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals. These nutrients are key to optimal health and play a vital role in every process in the body: from maintaining normal metabolism and immune function, to ensuring energy production from foods, reducing oxidative stress, and protecting against diseases. The best way to ensure you obtain an adequate amount of all the necessary micronutrients is to eat the rainbow. Each colour category represents a different set of phytochemicals with a range of health benefits.

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Red fruits and vegetables contain lycopene, folate, and vitamin K, and are known for their anti-cancer and heart-healthy properties. Examples: red peppers, tomatoes, strawberries, beets.

Orange and yellow fruits and vegetables are rich in carotenoids and vitamin C and A, nutrients that support immune function and eye health. Examples: oranges, mangoes, carrots, sweet potatoes, orange and yellow peppers, peaches.

Green fruits and vegetables are loaded with phytonutrients (chlorophyll and carotenoids), have anti-cancer properties, and are essential for bone health and immune function. Examples: broccoli, kale, collard greens, peas, zucchini, edamame.

Blue and purple fruits and vegetables contain anthocyanins and resveratrol, and are powerful antioxidants with anti-aging and anti-cancer properties. Examples: blueberries, eggplant, prunes, plums, purple cabbage.

Lastly, don't forget the white and beige fruits and vegetables. They may not be as colourful as the others, but their anti-cancer and anti-inflammatory properties make them a daily must-have. Examples: bananas, onions, mushrooms, potatoes, garlic, cauliflowers.

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SNACK ON NUTS AND SEEDS

Nuts and seeds are an athlete's best friend. They offer protein, healthy omega 3 fatty acids, magnesium, iron, vitamin E, and many other vital micronutrients. While nuts and seeds are calorie-dense foods and their consumption should be limited by those trying to lose weight, athletes who need to consume large amounts of calories can sprinkle them on their salads, porridge, and soups, to boost their caloric intake.



Here's a list of a few must-have nuts and seeds to enjoy daily:

Almonds - highest percentage of protein among nuts, rich in vitamin E, manganese, 25g=145 calories

Walnuts - high in antioxidants and omega 3 fatty acids, 25g=165 calories

Brazil nuts - loaded with selenium, but also rich in magnesium and zinc. Two Brazil nuts per day covers your daily selenium requirement, 25g=170 calories

Flaxseeds - rich in magnesium and zinc. 2 tablespoons of flaxseed provides your daily omega 3 fatty acid intake, 25g=130 calories

Chia seeds - 2 tablespoons of chia seeds not only covers your daily omega 3 fatty acid requirements, but also provides 150mg of calcium (a fifth of your daily requirements), 25g=120 calories



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4 BOOST YOUR PERFORMANCE WITH BEETROOT JUICE

Beetroots are natural supplements that can enhance physical performance up to 16%. They are rich in carbohydrates and bursting with antioxidants, vitamin C, carotenoids, flavonoids, and nitrates. The latter is the one nutrient that is associated with improved athletic performance. After consumption, nitrate is converted to nitric oxide, this improves blood flow and oxygen delivery to the working muscles, which in turn improves cardiovascular performance as well as muscle function. To see the greatest benefit, start supplementing with 70-500ml of beetroot juice at least 6 days prior to a big event.



5 BEST POST-WORKOUT SNACK: HOME-MADE SMOOTHIES

The main goal of post-workout nutrition is to replenish the depleted glycogen stores by consuming carbohydrates. In addition, protein is needed to promote protein synthesis and repair of muscle tissue. It's also very important to replace any fluids that were lost during the workout.

It's advised to consume this snack within two hours of your workout since your muscles are primed to take in the nutrients. Most athletes, however, find it easier to drink liquids rather than have solid foods post-workout; besides, smoothies are easier on your digestion. By simply adding a fruit or vegetable (banana, apple, or blueberries), a source of protein (peanut butter, soya milk, or hemp seeds), and of course a fluid (water or plant milk of your choice), you can turn your smoothie into the perfect post-workout snack.

