

Edibles for Endurance, Electrolytes and Energy



By Michele The Trainer

The content of this article is not intended to substitute for medical advice. Please see your doctor, nutritionist or dietician if you have or have any questions regarding specific food or special dietary needs.

We all grew up with the guidance, “do not swim on a full stomach” or “do not swim after eating,” but is this advice true? Is it an urban myth? Snopes.com (<http://www.snopes.com/oldwives/hourwait.asp>) says that it is a myth. As fitness professionals we must go deeper (pun intended!) to investigate. Concern for our clients and students leads us to encourage proper hydration and proper nutrition (energy and electrolytes) to safely fuel their workout (exertion and endurance).

See Chapter 13 “Basic Nutrition and Weight Management” of the *AEA Aquatic Fitness Professional Manual* and review the section on water and fluid replacement!

Electrolytes are essential minerals. MedicineNet.com provides the following definition: “Chemically, electrolytes are substances that become ions in solution and acquire the capacity to conduct electricity. Electrolytes are present in the human body, and the balance of the electrolytes in our bodies is essential for normal function of our cells and our organs.”

When we exert ourselves and perspire, we are losing electrolytes and they need to be replenished. The major electrolytes are sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium. The Mayo Clinic sites hydration and electrolytes as factors to prevent cramps, whether leg cramps or heat cramps. One natural source of electrolytes comes from coconut water; coconut water is now commonly sold in hot yoga studios (yoga in a room that is over 100 degrees F) as a replenishing drink because the participants lose a lot of fluid and electrolytes in that type of class! The aquatic environment is similar in climate, both hot and humid.

Read the labels of sports drinks very carefully because many have additional refined sugar, similar to soft drinks, and some do not contain any electrolytes. Also be mindful of not OVER hydrating; hyponatremia can occur if you dilute your electrolytes. Please ask your doctor, nutritionist or RD if you have any questions.

Part of my fitness background includes triathlon endurance sports - swimming, biking and running. When I was a marathon pace leader, we had a constant stream of

food/snacks/bars/drinks from sponsors being served to us in tiny portions constantly during our training and at the events as well. You could consume more calories during training or the event, than you burned doing the workout.

The abundance of available food and drinks was to prevent what is commonly referred to as “bonking” or “hitting the wall”. Wikipedia offers a tribal definition:

“In endurance sports, particularly cycling and running, hitting the wall or the bonk describes a condition caused by the depletion of glycogen stores in the liver and muscles, which manifests itself by precipitous fatigue and loss of energy. Milder instances can be remedied by brief rest and the ingestion of food or drinks containing carbohydrates. The condition can usually be avoided by ensuring that glycogen levels are high when the exercise begins, maintaining glycogen levels during exercise by eating or drinking carbohydrate-rich substances, or by reducing exercise intensity.”

Take a look around the gym floor. My athletic clients, if they are working out on the gym floor or outdoors for more than an hour, always seem to have a water bottle (or a few water bottles), one or more snacks, and perhaps an electrolyte sports drinks. Our aquatic clients and students that do extended workouts also need to hydrate and nourish themselves during aquatic workouts.

On my aquatic class teaching days, I have several folks that will stay with me for several hours. I request that they bring water and a small snack, recommended by their doctor, to safely fuel their workout. Aquatic training for a few hours IS endurance exercise. If we take that one step further to an outdoor pool, then our need to hydrate and replenish electrolytes due to the heat, sun and perspiration becomes as critical as for outdoor marathon training!

In an effort to gain a better understanding, I consulted with Trish Halterman, MS, who is both a Registered Dietitian (RD) and a Licensed Dietitian (LD) in West Virginia. “I believe that old saying about not getting in the water for an hour after eating is just an ‘old wives’ tale’ and like you, I can’t find any valid information to the contrary. What an individ-

ual can tolerate usually depends on how fit they are, what they eat and what type of swimming they will be doing. For water aerobics classes (or recreational swimming for a few hours) it is probably a good idea to have small, easy to digest snacks/fluids (about 100 - 200 calories per hour) to stay hydrated and help maintain blood sugar. Foods high in carbohydrates and low in fat are the best choices.

I think the problems can occur when one has eaten a large amount of food (especially high fat) and then exercises intensely. That can cause a lot of GI discomfort - nausea/vomiting or cramping/diarrhea. Also, for people trying to lose weight, the longer the body goes without some energy supplied, the metabolism slows down, so they burn less calories in the body’s attempt to try to conserve fuel. That’s why you’ll hear people say they hardly eat anything and they are still not losing weight. And then, (if they allow themselves to get too dehydrated or hungry during the workout), they could probably overeat when done exercising.”

This is not a suggestion for swimming on a full stomach. However, if you plan an extensive workout in the pool or gym, especially on a hot day, you may want to bring some fuel for your body. Please ask your doctor, nutritionist or registered dietician if you have questions about snacks, electrolytes, or proper hydration for your amount of exercise. With Energy! ▀

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