

November, 2003

YOU'LL RUN HOW YOU EAT

By Rob Maxwell, M.A.

Do you remember the saying “You are what you eat?” There is a lot of truth to it. Eat a lot of junk and you’ll feel pretty junkie. I’ll take this a step further and apply it to our running—you will run like you eat. You should know what all professional runners and athletes know, and that is, you CANNOT be your best on a poor diet.

Since carbohydrates are and should be the focal point of a runner’s diet, let’s focus on them. Do you know how to use carbohydrates? If you’ve been reading “good” literature and staying up on sports medicine, you may know that experts have changed the way they think about carbohydrates. Remember the old structure of simple carbohydrates versus complex carbs? Well that way of thinking has been replaced. Now they know that some “simple carbs” work like complex carbs and vice versa. What most experts use to rate carbs is now referred to the GLYCEMIC INDEX.

The Glycemic Index is a number that indicates how quickly carbohydrates enter the blood stream. LOW GLYCEMIC INDEX (LGI) carbs enter the blood stream slowly, so you have stable blood sugar and use these carbohydrates slowly. HIGH GLYCEMIC INDEX (HGI) carbs enter the bloodstream quickly and get used quickly. The mainstay of a healthy runner’s diet should be a variety of LGI carbohydrates, as you might have guessed. LGI carbohydrates ensure that you are filling and keeping your body’s glycogen levels high so you have energy to train and compete. LGI carbs are also the carbs you want to eat before training and competition. Most athletes have t his backwards and eat HGI carbs before training, thinking they are going to get an energy boost. What they get is the opposite because shortly after the ingestion of such GHI carbs, you get a quick high and a fast crash. Before training or races you’ll want to consume roughly 50-75 grams of LGI carbs two hours before starting.

There is good news for you folks with a sweet tooth. HGI carbs are very important to a runner’s diet. These are the carbohydrates you want to ingest immediately after training or racing. I know this sounds strange, but when the glycogen stores have been depleted, the cells become like sponges, sucking up any carbohydrate circulation around. And studies have shown that HGI carbs absorb faster than LGI carbs when the glycogen stores have been depleted. So if you’re a Pepsi freak, this is your time to enjoy one guilt-free. Not too much though. Fifty to seventy-five grams after training the first hour and the same the second hour is about what you body wants.

Your body also prefers HGI carbs to LGI while in the middle of training or racing. Using these types of carbs during running is called glycogen sparing. As a rule of thumb, if the training or racing is greater than 90 minutes, you’ll wan to ingest 50-75 grams and you would space this out beginning at 20 minutes into the session.

The Glycemic Index list is huge, so I’ll just give you some TOP TENS. You can find more information by looking it up online or in most nutritional reading.

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LOW GLYCEMIC INDEX FOODS

- Sourdough bread
- Rye bread
- Legumes of any kind
- Brown/wild rice
- Granny smith apples
- Yogurt
- Any bagel made with sourdough or rye
- Carrots
- Broccoli
- Yams

HIGH GLYCEMIC INDEX FOODS

- Gatorade
- Powerbar
- Energy gels
- Baked potato
- Pasta (regular)
- White rice
- White bread
- Wheat bread
- Soda
- Banana

Remember: How well your race went and a lot more to do with how well you ate that week and for that race day than how many miles you ran that week!