

running on empty

With the current sports drink craze in full flow, keeping yourself fuelled for exercise in a healthy, natural way can sometimes be as tough as the sport itself! **Jamie Richards** gives us a head start on how to step up our game the homemade way.

Boxes of fizzy drinks, crammed with artificial sweeteners, spewing out over the pavement filling the air with the sickly scent of glucose. Your worst nightmare perhaps? Or maybe just your local marathon event promoting good health and vitality on a sunny Sunday morning? Possibly, it's a bit of both.

These days, it's incredibly difficult to figure out what is good for us and what is a marketing man's saucy dream. Take expensive isotonic drinks, for example. The evidence supporting their use is decidedly sketchy, more so if you look at the supposed benefits. Yet, time and again, we are told that drinking them to replace fluids during exercise is beneficial. Isn't water good enough any more? Despite vending machines being banned from schools, any sports centre in your local area will boast a range of sports drink vending machines. Make no mistake, these are aimed directly at the young and impressionable. With the heavily branded, confident associations to modern sports icons, the message is most definitely 'drink this and you'll perform like me'.

In sharp contrast, the following guidelines, drawn up by The National Federation of State High School Associations in the USA for young athletes, states that: 'Energy drinks should not be used for hydration; Energy drinks should not be consumed by athletes who are dehydrated; Energy drinks should not be consumed without prior medical approval, by athletes taking over the counter or prescription medications'.

The easily digestible, alkaline date is packed with glucose...

Looking at the advertising, it is easy to assume that strong scientific research supports the consumption of energy products. Wrong. Besides, the fact is that approximately two million years of evolutionary H2O consumption trumps the 'double-blind placebo controlled trial' that we're told to rely on these days. Taking on fluids during exercise of less than an hour has no statistical benefit to performance! In which case, all those 5k races full of runners with bottle in hand have only built up their arm strength in preparation for an egg and spoon race!

The balance of acid and alkaline within the body is vital for overall health and performance. Modern processed diets tend to be acid forming, and mass produced sports nutrition products are no different. Artificial sweeteners carry a high acid content too, as do synthetic vitamins, syrups and high heat production methods. The over consumption of acid forming foods is the main suspect in the development of a host of modern chronic disease states.

So, what should the modern fitness enthusiast be fuelling up with? If you start exercising in a well-fed and well-hydrated state, you shouldn't need anything for exercise of under an hour. Over an hour and you might want to consider a refreshing homemade drink, such as:

500ml chilled rooibos tea
1tsp honey
Pinch of natural sea salt
Pinch of fresh grated ginger (optional)
Juice of half a lemon
Dissolve the honey and salt in a little hot water then mix the remaining ingredients together.

Exercising for over two hours, and you should consider consuming some solids. Pitted fresh dates are nature's ready-made energy gels. The easily digestible, alkaline date is packed with glucose that is easily converted by the liver into glycogen that is used for sustained energy. This makes it an ideal snack to support hard-core exercising. Take a few pitted fresh dates with you in a zip lock bag and consume at regular intervals.

If you're going out for the day, then why not take easily digestible, solid foods along to maintain your blood sugar levels. Pots of rice pudding with tropical fruit are ideal. Or try my favourite buckwheat pancakes spread with peanut butter and jam. Then roll them up like cigars and wrap them in cling film – a perfect nutritional package when you're on the go.

Buckwheat pancakes
125g buckwheat flour
Pinch of salt
3 eggs lightly beaten
300ml milk/soya milk

Beat the eggs and flour together then gradually add the milk to make a batter. Heat a little butter in a frying pan, add a ladle full of batter and cook until golden on each side. Reserve them under a warm grill or refrigerate until needed.

Exercise of any kind creates physical stress. So, remember to use fresh ingredients (that have had the minimum amount of processing) to nourish your body... as well as supporting a record-breaking performance. You'll make a more rapid recovery, and be raring to go for your next session - with stacks of energy in reserve!

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