

The 25 Best Foods for Fitness

When it comes to choosing the foods we eat, we have so many choices that it often becomes confusing. As Americans, we are blessed with almost every kind of food imaginable, available right next door at the supermarket. There are, however, some very specific foods that help improve athletic performance. The foods listed below are particular important to keep in your diet. The following foods, in alphabetical order, provide premium fuel for the active athlete.

Banana

The perfect portable snack. They're one of the richest sources of potassium, which may help regulate blood pressure, and are good sources of fiber. Frozen banana chunks make a terrific guilt-free snack.

Bananas are also a natural antacid and help keep your muscles from cramping.

1 banana = 105 calories, 0.5 g fat, 27 g carbohydrate, 1.2 g protein, 1 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 2.2 g fiber, 451 mg potassium.

Beef

Truly lean beef is a great source of zinc, high-quality protein and iron. Choose lean cuts such as shank, round, flank, and chuck and trim all excess fat before cooking. Broil or bake meat on a rack, so meat doesn't cook in its fat.

3-oz. lean round steak = 163 calories, 5 g fat, 0 g carbohydrate, 27 g protein, 56 mg sodium, 69 mg cholesterol, 0 g fiber, 13% RDA for iron, 32% for zinc, 41% for vitamin B12.

Beans-Legumes

An excellent source of fiber (important for keeping blood sugar and cholesterol levels under control). In fact, beans provide even more soluble fiber than oats. They're high in protein and a good source of folic acid, a B vitamin important for building protein and red blood cells.

1/2 cup serving = 112 calories, 0.4 g fat, 21 g carbohydrate, 7.5 g protein, 1 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 7.7 g fiber, 304 mg potassium, 11% RDA for folic acid.

Broccoli

A wonder food! - one of the best nutritional bets around. Not only is broccoli high in fiber and vitamin C, it provides folic acid, calcium, magnesium and iron.

1 cup, cooked = 46 calories, 0.4 g fat, 9 g carbohydrate, 5 g protein, 16 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 4.8 g fiber, 164% RDA for vitamin C, 42% RDA for vitamin A, 17% for calcium, 24% for folic acid.

Brown Rice

A good source of complex carbohydrates that provides twice as much fiber as white rice. Moreover, it beats white rice for almost every nutrient, including zinc, magnesium, protein, vitamin B6 and selenium.

1/2 cup serving = 116 calories, 0.6 g fat, 25 g carbohydrate, 2.5 g protein, 0 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 0.6 g fiber

Carrot Juice

Probably the most concentrated source of beta-carotene, which, in addition to its possible role as a cancer fighter, may play a key role in preventing the formation of cataracts later in life. Beta-carotene, a source of Vitamin A, also may boost your immune system's ability to fight bacterial and viral infections.

1/2 cup serving = 49 calories, 0.2 g fat, 11 g carbohydrate, 1 g protein, 36 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 1.2 g fiber, about 33% RDA for vitamin A.

Low Fat or Fat Free Cheeses

Great sources of calcium, but read nutritional labels carefully: Some of these cheeses aren't much lower in fat than their regular counterparts, and they can be high in sodium. Choose one that contains 5 grams or less fat per ounce.

1 -oz serving Alpine Lace = 85 calories, 5 g fat, 7 g protein, 85 mg sodium, 20 mg cholesterol, 35% RDA for calcium.

Chicken

Three ounces of skinless chicken breast has only 3 grams of fat and contains vitamin B6, a nutrient important for metabolizing protein. Dark meat has more fat than white, but also more B vitamins, iron, zinc, and other nutrients. Unlike popular belief, skin fat does not "migrate" into the meat, so cook the chicken with the skin on and remove after cooking. This keeps the chicken moist.

3-oz. Breast, no skin, roasted = 140 calories, 2.9 g fat, 0 g carbohydrates, 26 g protein, 62 mg sodium, 0 g fiber, 58% RDA for niacin, 25 % for vitamin B6.

Corn

An often-overlooked source of fiber and carbohydrate. Sure, fresh corn tastes best, but frozen or canned alternatives are convenient ways to get additional fiber in your diet. Corn also has almost no fat.

1/2 cup serving = 67 calories, 0.6 g fat, 17 g carbohydrate, 2.5 g protein, 4 mg sodium, 1.6 g fiber, 17 micrograms folic acid.

Dried Fruit

Because most of the water has been removed, dried fruits are terrific concentrated sources of energy and good sources of iron - a mineral that helps prevent anemia. High in fructose, they also can be intensely sweet, making them great desserts or snacks - and they're fat free.

3-oz serving = 203 calories, 0.4 g fat, 53 g carbohydrate, 3.1 g protein, 8.5 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 6.8 g fiber, 22% RDA for iron, 123% RDA for vitamin A.

Fig Bars

A favorite among cyclists and runners because they pack a strong carbohydrate punch and are easy to eat during exercise. Much lower in fat than most treats, fig bars also supply a bit of fiber - not a lot, but more than most sweets.

2 bars = 106 calories, 1.9 g fat, 21 g carbohydrate, 1 g protein, 90 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 5 g fiber.

Grapes

Once thought to provide few significant nutrients, now researchers find that grapes are a good source of boron, a mineral believed to be important in building and maintaining healthy bones.

1/2 cup serving = 29 calories, 0.2 g fat, 1 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 0.3 g fiber.

Kiwi

The odd little fruit in the fuzzy brown wrapper proves that good things can come in small, ugly packages. Each kiwi provides 75 mg of vitamin C and 1.7 grams of fiber.

1 kiwi = 46 calories, 0.3 g fat, 11 g carbohydrate, 0.8 g protein, 4 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 1.7 g fiber, 124% RDA for vitamin C.

Lentils

Good sources of protein and complex carbohydrates, lentils also deliver a good amount of iron, particularly if you're limiting your intake of red meat. Lentils are easier to prepare than other legumes because you don't have to soak them overnight before cooking. Great on their own, in soups or as an addition to ground meat.

1/2 cup serving = 105 calories, 0 g fat, 20 g carbohydrate, 8 g protein, 30 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 5.2 g fiber, 12 % RDA for iron, 7% for zinc, 9% for folic acid.

Skim Milk

Skim milk is an excellent low-fat source of calcium and vitamin D - both important for maintaining healthy bones. Research suggests that you have less risk of developing colon cancer with high blood levels of vitamin D than with low levels. But don't turn to supplements for vitamin D: large amounts can be toxic.

8 oz. = 80 calories, 0.4 g fat, 11 g carbohydrate, 8 g protein, 4 mg. cholesterol, 117 mg sodium, 0 g fiber, 24% RDA for vitamin D, 28% for calcium.

Oatmeal

A good source of soluble fiber, and then some: In a research study, adding 2 ounces a day of oatmeal to a low-fat diet significantly lowered subjects' blood cholesterol in about four weeks.

1/2 cup serving = 73 calories, 1.2 g fat, 13 g carbohydrate, 3 g protein, 1 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 2.7 g fiber.

Orange Juice

Besides being an excellent source of vitamin C, one 6-ounce glass provides nearly as much potassium as a banana and about 23 percent of the RDA for the sometimes-hard-to-find B vitamin folic acid.

6 oz. = 76 calories, 0.3 g fat, 15 g carbohydrate, 1 g protein, 1 mg sodium, 0.1 g fiber, 340 mg potassium, 142% RDA for vitamin C, 23% RDA for folic acid.

Papaya

Papaya is a treasure trove of nutrients. One-half of this exotic fruit provides almost as much potassium as a banana and more than 100% of the RDA for vitamin C. It's also a good source of cancer-fighting beta-carotene.

1/2 papaya = 59 calories, 0.2 g fat, 15 g carbohydrate, 1 g protein, 4 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 12.2 g fiber, 395 mg potassium, 158% RDA for vitamin C, about 62% RDA for vitamin A.

Pasta

Pasta is loaded with complex carbohydrates for long-lasting energy, whether you're an athlete or a couch potato. Enriched pasta also provides iron and the important B vitamins thiamine, niacin and riboflavin.

1/2 cup serving = 77 calories, 0.3 g fat, 28 g carbohydrate, 5.3 g protein, 0 mg cholesterol, 1 mg sodium, 35% RDA for thiamine, 15% RDA for riboflavin, 15% RDA for niacin, 10% RDA for iron.

Potato

The potato is probably one of the most underrated foods. Besides being a powerhouse of complex carbohydrates, a 6-ouncer also provides almost twice as much potassium as a banana, just over one-third of the RDA for vitamin C and 66 percent of the RDA for iron. It's also a good source of copper, which most people tend to be short on.

6-oz, baked, with skin = 337 calories, 0.2 g fat, 78 g carbohydrate, 7 g protein, 35 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 4 g fiber, 974 g potassium, 38% RDA for vitamin C, 66% RDA for iron, 70% RDA for copper, 56% RDA for vitamin B6.

Salmon

Salmon is one of the richest sources for omega-3 fatty acids, which may provide some protection against heart disease. Eating salmon or other ocean fish like mackerel, herring or tuna twice a week may be enough for you to reap the health benefits. Fish oil may also fight arthritis, alleviate psoriasis and reduce high blood pressure. Salmon is also an excellent source of selenium, which may play a role in cancer prevention.

3 oz. cooked = 45 calories, 0.6 g fat, 0 g carbohydrate, 0 g fiber, 40 micrograms selenium, 42% RDA for niacin, 35% RDA for calcium. Most types of salmon provide about 1 g omega-3 fatty acids.

Strawberries

Sweet, delicious strawberries are excellent sources of vitamin C and fiber. They also contain ellagic acid and beta-carotene, which may prove important in cancer prevention.

1-cup serving = 45 calories, 0.6 g fat, 11 g carbohydrate, 1 g protein, 2 mg sodium, 0 mg cholesterol, 2.2 g fiber, 141% RDA for vitamin C.

Water

The most critical nutrient in your body, it's needed for just about everything that happens, and you lose it fast: at least 2 cups daily just exhaling; 10 cups through normal waste and body cooling; 1 to 2 quarts per hour running, biking or working out. Eight glasses a day is enough for sedentary people, but if your physically active, you need more.

Drink 8 to 20 ounces of water about 15 minutes before working out. If you run, drink at least 2 cups of water for every pound you lose on your course.

Whole-Grain Cereals

Besides providing lots of complex carbohydrates, they're a great way to get fiber in your diet - a prevention measure that the National Cancer Society strongly recommends. What's more, research suggests that eating a high-fiber cereal at breakfast may curb your appetite at lunch.

Read the labels: a cereal should contain at least 5 grams of fiber and no more than 1 or 2 grams of fat per serving.

Fat Free Yogurt

Among the few truly excellent sources of calcium - 452 mg per 8-ounce carton - and riboflavin, yogurt's also a strong source of vitamin B12. Use it to reduce fat in your diet: substitute it for sour cream in casseroles or sauces; mix with herbs for vegetable dip; blend with fruit for a thick drink; stir into soups to make them creamy. Frozen, it's an excellent substitute for ice cream. To cut calories in half in flavored yogurts, choose brands artificially sweetened with NutraSweet.

8-oz serving, plain = 127 calories, 0.4 g fat, 17 g carbohydrate, 13 g protein, 174 mg sodium, 4 mg cholesterol, 0 g fiber 45% RDA for calcium, 31% for riboflavin, 23% RDA for vitamin B12.

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