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# The Olympic Eating Plan

Article By: Kyle Stack

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## How Winter Olympians fuel their bodies

An Olympic athlete's path to success involves more than mere natural athletic ability and intense physical training. The food they put in their bodies during training, competition or even the off-season can have a great effect on an athlete's performance.

As a former Olympic cyclist, who competed in the 1992 Barcelona Games, Kelly Anne Erdman, MSc, R.D.

understands the routine required for high-level competition. "We're looking at high-quality sources of protein—beef, pork, eggs, turkey," says Erdman, who now helps organize the nutrition programs for Canada's top athletes at the Canadian Sport Centre in Calgary, Alberta. "That's their main recovery meal, which is generally after their midday weight-and-resistance training." Whole-grain rice and pasta as well as fresh vegetables round out the athletes' diets.

Most Winter Olympians eat between five and seven times per day. On competition days, they typically consume a pre-competition meal (normally, one of those high-quality protein sources) two or three hours before their event starts. Some might also have a protein bar or dried fruit within a half hour of the event for "an extra boost to their glucose level," Erdman says. "We don't want our athletes so hungry that they get distracted or so full that they become lethargic or tired." However, Erdman would rather an athlete be slightly hungry than slightly full—that way, the body's blood supply is focused on the exercise muscles rather than on the digestive system.

Canadian cross-country skier Madeleine Williams, 26, who'll make her Olympics debut in Vancouver, agrees with Erdman. "On a race day, I'm better off hungry."

Williams starts the day with eggs, spinach and toast for breakfast before adhering to the three-hour rule before a race. On training days, she'll eat a meal 90 minutes before a workout, follow it with carbohydrate-and-protein-fueled chocolate milk to promote recovery, then eat once more roughly an hour later, sometimes feasting on bananas with peanut butter. It's all about ensuring that she takes in at least as many calories as she expends. (Erdman says women consume roughly 3,000 calories per day during training, while men take in 4,000 to 5,000.)

Caloric intake isn't the only burning topic for dietitians' management of Winter Olympians. Susie Parker-Simmons, MS, RD, a sports dietitian and physiologist for the United States Olympic Committee at their Colorado Springs, CO, Olympic training center, emphasizes that higher altitudes at Winter Olympic venues lead to possible iron deficiency.

"In higher altitudes, the body needs to work harder to deliver oxygen around the body and get rid of carbon dioxide," Parker-Simmons says. Since the body desires more red blood cells to keep pace with the increased oxygen requirement, athletes need to ensure a suitable iron level before traveling to higher elevations for their event.

A loss in appetite and dehydration, due to low humidity, are two more factors that

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Parker-Simmons cites as causes for concern at higher elevations. To that end, she encourages athletes to gulp an extra 32-ounce sports drink per day since it provides an easier way to absorb carbohydrates than does eating.

Williams drinks water every 10 to 15 minutes in hour-plus-long workout sessions during the training season, which usually begins in May after a two-to-four-week off-season. Training lasts until the end of August, at which time, she and other winter athletes transition to sport-specific work the next two months preparing for the start of the competition season in November.

The most common point at which an athlete will alter their nutrition program is during competition season, when their immune systems need an extra boost. "This time of year, they're competing and that means high stress," Erdman says. The cold weather conditions mixed with the physical strain of competition and the close proximity in which the athletes live in the Olympic Village translates into a higher susceptibility to illness.

Supplements such as whey protein, creatine and glutamine are sometimes provided. Erdman and other dietitians test supplements to ensure they avert the risk of any inadvertent positive doping. Athletes can then purchase dietitian-approved supplements at select stores in Calgary.

Another situation that requires planning is when the performance venue is too distant from the complex at which the athlete normally eats. That's when the dietitians bring food to the venue. After all, the athletes must continue working in concert with their nutrition plan if they are to realize their Olympic dreams.

### Next Steps

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