**Diet and Nutrition for Runners**

**Eat Well for Good Health and Running Performance**

By [Christine Luff](http://running.about.com/bio/Christine-Luff-35471.htm), About.com Guide

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As a runner, your diet is important not only for maintaining good health, but also to promote peak performance. Proper nutrition and [hydration](http://running.about.com/od/nutritionandhydration/a/hydration101.htm) can make or break a workout or race, and also greatly affects how runners feel, work and think.

A balanced diet for healthy runners should include these essentials: carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Here are some basic guidelines for a nutritious, healthy balance:

**Carbohydrates**
As a runner, carbohydrates should make up about 60 - 65% of your [total calorie](http://running.about.com/od/nutritionforrunners/f/How-Many-Daily-Calories-Do-I-Need.htm) intake. Without a doubt, carbs are the best source of energy for athletes. Research has shown that for both quick and long-lasting energy, our bodies work more efficiently with carbs than they do with proteins or fats. Whole grain pasta, steamed or boiled rice, potatoes, fruits, starchy vegetables, and whole grain breads are good carb sources.

**Protein**
Protein is used for some energy and to repair tissue damaged during training. In addition to being an essential nutrient, protein keeps you feeling full longer, which helps if you're trying to [lose weight](http://running.about.com/od/runningandweightloss/a/weightloss.htm). Protein should make up about 15% - 20% of your daily intake. Runners, especially those running long distances, should consume .5 to .75 grams of protein per pound of body weight. Try to concentrate on protein sources that are low in fat and cholesterol such as lean meats, fish, low-fat dairy products, poultry, whole grains, and beans.

Problem: Not Consuming Enough Protein

Many runners focus so much on consuming their carbs that they don't pay enough attention to their protein. Protein is used for some energy and to repair tissue damaged during training. Protein should make up about 15% of your daily intake.

**Solution:** Runners, especially those training for long distances such as marathons, should consume .5 to .75 grams of protein per pound of body weight. Good sources of protein are fish, lean meat, poultry, beans, nuts, whole grains, egg whites, low-fat milk, low-fat cheese and some vegetables. If you're not sure how much protein you should be getting, meet with a sports dietitian for advice on how to get the right amount of protein in your diet.

**Fat**
A high fat diet can quickly pack on the pounds, so try to make sure that no more than 20 - 25% of your total diet comes from fats. Stick to foods low in saturated fats and cholesterol. Foods such as nuts, oils, and cold-water fish provide essential fats called omega-3s, which are vital for good health and can help prevent certain diseases. Most experts recommend getting about 3,000 mg of omega-3 fat a day.

**Vitamins**
Runners don't get energy from vitamins, but they are still an important part of their diet. Exercise may produce compounds called free radicals, which can damage cells. Vitamins C, E, and A are antioxidants and can neutralize free radicals. Getting your vitamins from whole foods is preferable to supplementation; there's no strong evidence that taking supplements improves either health or athletic performance.

**Calcium:** A calcium-rich diet is essential for runners to prevent osteoporosis and [stress fractures](http://running.about.com/od/commonrunninginjuries/p/stressfracture.htm). Good sources of calcium include low-fat dairy products, calcium-fortified juices, dark leafy vegetables, beans, and eggs. Your goal should be 1,000 to 1,300 mg of calcium per day.

**Iron:** You need this nutrient to deliver oxygen to your cells. If you have an iron-poor diet, you'll feel weak and fatigued, especially when you run. Men should aim for 8 mg of iron a day, and women need 18 mg. Good natural sources of iron include lean meats, leafy green vegetables, nuts, shrimp, and scallops.

Problem: Not Getting Enough Iron

Iron-deficiency anemia is fairly common, particularly in female athletes who have heavy periods. Anemia causes fatigue and reduced performance.

**Solution:** If you frequently feel tired without an explanation, get your iron levels checked with a blood test. To help prevent anemia, make sure your diet includes red meat, or iron-rich alternatives (dark-meat chicken or turkey, salmon, tuna) and an iron-fortified cereal. It's also important to include vitamin C in your diet because it helps with iron absorption. So try to include vitamin C-rich fruits and vegetables, such as oranges, tomatoes, berries, and broccoli, at every meal.

**Sodium and other electrolytes:** Small amounts of sodium and other electrolytes are lost through sweat during exercise. Usually, electrolytes are replaced if you follow a balanced diet. But if you find yourself craving salty foods, it may be your body's way of telling you to get more sodium. Try drinking a sports drink or eating some pretzels after exercise. If you're running longer than 90 minutes, then you should need to replace some of the electrolytes you're losing through sweat by [drinking sports drinks](http://running.about.com/od/hydrationforrunners/f/sportsdrinks.htm) or [taking in salt](http://running.about.com/od/nutritionforrunners/f/Should-I-Take-Salt-Before-A-Long-Run-Or-Marathon.htm) during your runs.

# Nutrition Tips For Female Vegetarian Runners

Female vegetarian runners have special nutritional needs while marathon training. By Scott Fisher Published 10/04/2007

 It's possible to support your training with a [vegetarian diet](http://www.runnersworld.com/article/0%2C7120%2Cs6-242-303-308-673-0%2C00.html), but realize that training for such a demanding event does increase your need for certain nutrients. Meeting this demand will be your challenge.

Most important, you'll need plenty of [protein](http://www.runnersworld.com/article/0%2C7120%2Cs6-242-300--6276-0%2C00.html). Inadequate protein intake puts you at risk for fatigue and [injuries](http://www.runnersworld.com/channel/0%2C7119%2Cs6-241-0-0-0%2C00.html?cm_re=HP-_-Homepage%20Channel-_-Injury%20Prevention), and it also can contribute to amenorrhea (absence of periods). Try to consume between 0.36 to 0.8 grams of protein per pound of body weight each day from sources such as soy products and legumes. You should be able to consume this amount fairly easily, considering that 11/2 cups of tofu or garbanzo beans contain 20 to 24 grams of protein.

You'll also need healthful amounts of [iron](http://www.runnersworld.com/article/0%2C7120%2Cs6-238-275--5020-0%2C00.html%22), calcium, and zinc from foods such as whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy products. Also, proper intake of vitamin B12 should keep your risk of anemia low. Good sources of B12 include breakfast cereals, fortified soy milk, and soy/veggie burgers. You might also consider a multi-vitamin/mineral supplement containing all of the nutrients I've mentioned.

Lastly, if you have nagging doubts about your diet or begin to feel fatigued in training, talk to a health professional, such as a registered dietitian who works regularly with vegetarian runners. These experts can assess your dietary needs and give specific recommendations.

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