

Optimizing Your Cycling Nutrition for Hot Weather

June 11, 2021

By Molly Hurford



As temperatures rise and we move into the summer season, cyclist nutrition and hydration needs will start to shift as well. Summer typically means longer rides in hotter conditions, which means that your hydration and nutrition strategies need to be dialed whether you're a top-level pro or a new recreational rider. Here, Anne Guzman, an Ontario-based sports nutritionist and cyclist, shares the intel you need to survive the sudden shift in weather from chilly to boiling hot.

It's Not Just About On-Bike Nutrition

"If you only think about what you're eating and drinking on the bike, you could be going into your ride completely depleted of carbohydrates or stored carbohydrates as glycogen," says Guzman. "We have to think about what we are doing during the whole day in order to not only support our cycling, but our health. A healthy person is a consistent athlete. And consistency is what is really important in sport!"

Remember, hydration also starts off the bike: Hop on the bike already dehydrated, and it's going to be almost impossible to get back on top of your hydration. So make sure that throughout the day, you're regularly sipping water! The same thing applies to nutrition: A perfectly-timed gel on the bike won't make up for a diet that doesn't adequately fuel you or help your muscles to recover from your rides.

Hydration is Key in Summer

A good sign that you're well-hydrated is if you're going to the washroom regularly, roughly every two to two and a half hours. "There's no exact magic number," says Guzman. "But you should have light yellow urine and not be struggling to pee." (One caveat: If you're taking certain supplements or eating something like beets, the color of your urine might be different.)

You may also need to add electrolytes—particularly sodium—to your bottles, especially if you're a heavy sweater. Do your black cycling shorts end up caked with white from sweat by the end of your ride? That's a sure sign that you're sweating out a lot of salt. A pinch of sea salt in your water bottle, or adding an electrolyte tab or powder, will help keep your body in balance.



Sip Water on *Every* Ride

Most of us will happily head out in the fall or winter without worrying about eating or drinking on a short sub-60 minute ride. But in the summer when it's really hot, you should never leave home without a bottle. For short rides, you don't need to worry about your food, but you should have fluids with you.

Over 90 Minutes or Adding Intensity, Start Fueling

A general rule of thumb is that any ride that goes over 90 minutes—or over an hour if you're adding in high-intensity intervals—will require some fuel in the form of simple carbohydrates. This will look different for every rider, so you'll need to do some trial-and-error practice to figure out how much food makes you feel strong on the bike, not stuffed. "Once you get over 90 minutes, or you're doing harder training, that's when sports nutrition guidelines start to kick in," says Guzman. "But there's a range." If you're newer to eating on the bike, start with between 100 and 200 calories per hour and slowly increase it as your gut gets used to digesting those sugars. You might find you're happy with 200 calories an hour, though some people will eat upwards of 450 calories per hour and feel fantastic.

During the summer, eating on the bike is even harder, because as temps soar, you may not feel as inclined to eat. Because your body is working hard to stay cool, you're going to feel less hungry, and your gut will often rebel against heavier, warmer foods. So you may need to switch up your fueling strategy. You can consider swapping bars for sports drinks (add ice to bottles to get even more of a cooling effect), or switch to food options that simply "feel" lighter. This might mean swapping your heavier granola bars for gummies, dates, or a smaller rice bar. There's no perfect food for every cyclist: You'll need to figure out what works for you!



Plan To Go Longer

Always carry at least an extra 30 to 60 minutes worth of food and water with you on a ride, because you never know when you'll be stopped waiting to fix a flat, or take a wrong turn, or just want to do a few extra miles because sunset isn't until 9:30PM.

"I always bring a couple extra gels in case someone else needs them, or in case you're out longer than you expect," Guzman says. "You could even bring a Ziploc with some extra powder for a sports drink, if you know you'll pass a spot to refill your bottle."

Supplements are... Supplemental

Remember that anytime you find yourself reaching for a pill or a powder, supplements aren't meant to replace a healthy diet. "You need a strong foundation before you're thinking about this supplement or that supplement," Guzman says. "Maybe it'll give you that one percent boost, but the strong foundation is way more powerful."

Remember You Control Your Nutrition

“You can’t control the weather, you can’t control a random flat tire, you can’t control your competitors.... But with your nutrition you do you have an opportunity to take a lot of control over how you’re going to feel on a ride,” says Guzman. So take advantage of the fact that you can control your nutrition and hydration, and get it dialed in this summer!

About the Author

Molly Hurford is a journalist in love with all things cycling, running, nutrition and movement-related. When not outside, she’s writing about being outside and healthy habits of athletes and interviewing world-class athletes and scientists for The Consummate Athlete podcast and website, and most recently launched the book ‘Becoming A Consummate Athlete.’ She’s the author of multiple books including the Shred Girls, a young adult fiction series and online community focused on getting girls excited about bikes. Molly is a little obsessed with getting people psyched on adventure and being outside, and she regularly hosts talks and runs clinics for cyclists and teaches yoga online and IRL... And in her spare time, the former Ironman triathlete now spends time tackling long runs and rides on trails or can be found out hiking with her mini-dachshund DW and husband, cycling coach and kinesiologist Peter Glassford.