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SHOULD YOU EAT BEFORE GOING TO THE GYM?

Ashleigh Feltham explains.

We all like results from our workout efforts, so does eating before hitting the gym give you better results? This is a complex question as it all depends on what you want from your session and your individual health needs.

Firstly, it depends when you are exercising. If you are an early morning gym goer, then eating with enough time for the food to be digested can be a challenge. Generally, you need two hours for a meal to be digested and if you are attending say a 6am class, then waking up at 4am to eat may not even be an option. If, however you have a health condition (e.g., diabetes) where your body needs the energy and the glucose (which is the breakdown energy form from carbohydrates), then eating can be very important.

If you choose not to eat after a longer time of fasting (e.g., like after a night's sleep), then your body will have used up most of its glycogen stores. What does this mean for fat burning? Potentially, your body switches to its fat stores faster because it does not have any reserved glucose stores to use. The downside of this is when your muscles don't have enough stores glycogen they will not work as efficiently as when they use fat stores. Therefore, if you are wanting to hit a personal best in squats you may want to consider fuelling beforehand to give your muscles the energy to produce their best force.

Now that you have a general picture of

the pros and cons of eating before exercising what should you eat if you do choose to eat? Here are some simple guidelines to help.

1. Make it low in fibre and fat, and not too high in protein as these components are slow to be digested in your stomach and fibre promotes your desire to visit the bathroom. This means you will either feel sluggish and not want to exercise or need to rush to the toilet every two seconds.
2. Choose a food or drink which your body is used to consuming. Now is not the time to try the new and improved smoothie at the café around the corner with ingredients you have never tasted before.
3. Give your body enough carbohydrates to fuel your muscles.

My favourite go-to pre-exercise meals and snacks include:

- Half a cup of oats with chopped fruit and low or no fat yogurt.
- One to two crumpets with sliced banana and drizzle of honey.
- One cup of pasta with a tomato based sauce.
- Fruit smoothie using low fat milk and yogurt and half a cup of frozen berries sweetened with cinnamon.
- Sough dough rye toast (this type of bread is more easily digested than regular wheat-based bread) with a banana and a tablespoon of honey.
- Raisin toast with jam spread sparingly.

- Tub of creamed rice with canned fruit in water.
- Tin of sweetcorn.

So what about coffee before exercise?

Personally, coffee is my preferred pick as a pre-exercise stimulant. Your body only needs 1mg to 3mg of caffeine per kilogram of bodyweight (e.g., 70mg to 210mg in a 70kg person), which is approximately one cup of coffee (espresso or brewed).

Studies have shown that moderate intake of caffeine can assist in your ability to exercise at a higher intensity and reduce the feeling of fatigue. Be mindful though, that everyone has a different tolerance to caffeine and some people with specific medical conditions should stay away from caffeine altogether. The downside of giving your body too much coffee can include:

- an upset stomach
- anxiety
- jitters
- increased heart rate
- make it harder not easier to exercise.

Take home message

Eating before the gym can be beneficial depending on your individual needs or goals for the session. It all comes down to what works best for you. If eating before exercising helps you exercise more regularly and feel like you're getting the best from your efforts, then go for it! **OH!**

