

Foods For Energy

How to fuel up on the run with the everyday foods in your pantry.

By Clara Silverstein

Energy bars, gels, and sports drinks are so convenient that it's hard to imagine life without them. Specially engineered for endurance athletes, these products deliver the right mix of nutrients in one tidy package. They taste good, too. Pity the poor runners, then, who can't take advantage of these easy energy options because they're plagued by food allergies or a finicky digestive system. (Or the unfortunate runner whose husband eats all the energy bars the night before her long run.) Are such runners doomed to bonk? Hardly. Everyday foods can pick you up when your energy levels are down. Your pantry, or at least the nearest mini-market, is filled with plenty of good options.

The trick to finding suitable alternatives to bars and gels, nutritionists say, is to know what your body needs and to give everything a trial run (or several) before you rely on it to sustain you during a long effort. "The goal is to consume 30 to 60 grams of easily digestible carbohydrates per hour on runs lasting longer than an hour," says Amy Jamieson-Petonic, R.D., manager of the Fairview Hospital Wellness Center in Cleveland. And, of course, those carbs must sit well with you, so be sure to experiment. What works for your running buddy may not work for you.

During her two Boston Marathon runs, Barbara Ruhs, R.D., a nutrition consultant at Harvard University, re-fueled with orange slices, LifeSavers, and Fig Newtons. Ruhs recommends snacks that are as close to whole foods as possible so that you can avoid ingredients such as partially hydrogenated oils, high fructose corn syrup, and artificial dyes. Some of her other picks include dried fruit, graham crackers, and granola bars. Crumbly foods like graham crackers can be a challenge. But when packed in individual-serving plastic containers, especially those designed for children's lunch boxes or camping trips, they fit easily into a fanny pack.

Joe Dwyer, one of the owners of the Running Wild specialty store in Coralville, Iowa, gets lots of questions from his customers about fueling up on the run. Energy bars and gels are, of course, his first recommendation. After those, he suggests saltines (especially in hot, humid weather) or small candies, such as Gummi Bears and Sweet Tarts. "They are easy to pack and can be consumed quickly," says Dwyer. Runner Abby Mitchell from Boston pins resealable plastic bags of jellybeans and Gummi Bears to her shorts during her marathons. "They give me a little burst of energy whenever I need it," she says.

Scott Fisher, R.D., a sports nutritionist and director of the Active Training and Nutrition Center in Englewood, New Jersey, agrees that small candies make a good choice for people who can't tolerate solid food, yet still need a quick source of simple carbohydrates. "Sucking on hard candy during a long run or marathon can be a nice alternative to energy gels," Fisher says. Another readily available alternative is honey. "It's a great, fast-acting carbohydrate. Carried in those little condiment packets, honey is easy and effective."

Sports drinks, which rehydrate runners while also delivering carbohydrates and electrolytes, are more easily tolerated and more difficult to substitute. Their formula depends on a specific concentration of carbohydrates, ideally between four and eight percent. "When you go above that percentage with sodas or fruit juice, it can lead to stomach upset," says Jamieson-Petonic.

Fisher recommends experimenting with different brands of sports drinks, and trying small amounts over a long period of time. "Tolerance typically improves with continued use," says Fisher. Or you can try mixing up your own substitute. Ruhs suggests adding one half cup of orange juice (which contains the electrolyte potassium) and a pinch of salt (sodium) to four cups of water.

Before you start stuffing the pockets of your running shorts with snacks, be realistic about your needs. "If you're adequately fueled and hydrated before a short workout, say a three- to four-miler, you shouldn't need anything else during the run," says Fisher. But if you're planning to run for more than an hour, you'll likely perform better with the energy boost from a sports drink or snack.

And if you live with someone who's always eating all the energy bars, just don't tell him where you stash the Fig Newtons and Sweet Tarts.

Bake Your Own

Have an oven? That's all you need to enjoy a new kind of energy bar. The San Francisco Bay Area company Matisse & Jack's has introduced a Homemade Energy Bar Mix. Available in two flavors (Cranberry Discovery and Chocolate Amazon), the mixes contain high-quality ingredients such as organic oats, dried fruit, and organic flax seed, and can be prepared in a variety of ways according to your dietary needs--dairy-free, lower sugar, or an energy-cookie variety. Just stir in a couple wet ingredients and bake. We loved the oven-fresh taste. (matisseandjacks.com)

Carb Count	
These energizing foods can help you reach the goal of consuming 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrates per hour during runs lasting longer than an hour.	
Food	Carbs (g)/cals
8 ounces Gatorade	14/50
1 packet GU gel	25/100
1 PowerBar	45/240
4 Fig Newtons	44/220
5 saltines	10/65
4 graham crackers	20/120
1 small plain bagel	30/157
2 tablespoons honey	34/128
1 ounce jelly beans	26/105
1 ounce dried fruit	17/65
3 hard candies	18/72
1 orange, sliced	15/62
1 ounce Gummi Bears	30/120