

TTIPS VOL.18/22 – INSIGHTS NUTRITION ON THE BIKE

What the cyclist says: “Wow, she hammers.”

What the cyclists means: “Darn, she’s faster than me.”

INTRODUCTION

On a few of our long club rides several in the group were falling off the back. I asked, “are you eating anything.” Answer: “ah, not really.” Oops. Another friend of mine, while at the far end of a long ride with me, also wasn’t eating. I asked “why not?” When he said he’s forgotten his food, I offered some of mine. He politely declined and said that he would “just gut it out.” We were cranking out lots of watts, and I knew his goose would soon be cooked. He was about to learn the hard way that you can’t “gut it out.” Sure enough, in about 15 minutes he “bonked.” He barely made it back to the start.

If you’ve not heard the term, ‘bonking’ on a bike is the same phenomenon that runners refer to when they say that they “hit the wall.” In a car you’d say, I “ran out of gas.” The results are similar in all three. And while I admire my friend’s tenacity and positive thinking, trying to push one’s body without proper nutrition while engaged in extreme cycling is nearly the same as trying to drive your car with no gas. It just isn’t gonna go.

Me? I eat nearly continuously when I’m on the bike, and I drink a quarter of a water bottle ever 15 minutes. That means I drink a bottle each hour while in the saddle, and I eat no less than every 45 minutes.

There is a ton of research regarding what you should eat, how much, when, and why while you are biking. Rather than lay out all of the science, I thought you might enjoy the following article from *Bicycling Magazine* because it offers advice for short, medium, and long rides. There’s something for every club rider here. Over time, you will learn what works for you, but in the meantime, there is lots of great advice in this article.

A QUICK GUIDE TO CYCLIST NUTRITION: HOW TO FUEL FOR RIDES OF EVERY LENGTH

COFFEE RIDES, TRAINING RIDES, EPIC RIDES. HERE'S HOW TO EAT AND KEEP THE ENGINE ROARING

BY: SELENE YEAGER/APRIL 14, 2022
BICYCLING MAGAZINE

At a past cycling camp, I was talking with Dave, a 50-year-old father of two who was training for an annual cycling weekend with friends. He was making progress, but was frustrated with his performance during long rides—once he passed three hours, he started having stomach trouble. As he rattled off a list of what he consumed each hour on the bike – half an energy bar, one gel, a bottle of sports drink and a bottle of water—I realized that despite riding for years, he was eating and drinking too much. He needed to revisit his cyclist nutrition plan and how exactly he fuels for each ride.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrate per hour of exercise, but few athletes understand the reason for this amount. The average person can process, or oxidize, only about one gram of carbohydrate per minute, no matter how much is consumed. The bottleneck isn't your muscles; it's your intestines, which can transport glucose from food you eat into your bloodstream only so fast. Dumping more carbohydrate into your gut doesn't necessarily increase the absorption rate, but it can increase your chances of an upset stomach.

It's easier than you think to overload on carbs. Take Dave as an example: His half an energy bar (23 grams of carbs), one gel (27 grams of carbs), and bottle of sports drink (about 50 grams of carbs) meant he was taking in about 100 grams of carbohydrate every hour. Early in his rides, he was doing great because he was getting all the fluid, energy, and sodium his body could handle, but after a few hours the excess carbohydrate sloshing around in his system was making him nauseous, bloated, and ill.

One of the easiest ways to optimize your carbohydrate intake during rides is to drink a low-carb, electrolyte hydrating drink while you're eating light, digestible snacks, like fig bars and bananas. Simply separating these two categories—hydration and solid food—typically brings people back into the range of 30 to 60 grams of carbohydrate per hour, while also ensuring they get adequate sodium and fluids.

Also, research suggests that by consuming energy foods that contain a mix of sugars (such as glucose and fructose, or glucose and maltodextrin) instead of just one type of sugar you can bump oxidation to as much as 1.7 grams per minute. Translation: The sugar leaves your gut and enters your bloodstream faster so you'll have more readily-available energy when you need it most.

Over the course of three days at camp, Dave made subtle changes to his on-bike eating habits. He set an alarm to beep every 15 minutes as a reminder to drink, instead of guzzling an entire bottle at once. He added granola bars and fig bars to his stash of energy bars and gels for variety. As we rolled past the four-hour mark, Dave was taking long turns at the front and chatting happily in the paceline as if the ride had just begun. To find the same success as Dave, here's an overview of the best cyclist nutrition—what to eat and drink on rides of various lengths—so you can pedal farther, faster, or ideally, both.

How to Fuel Short Rides

Ride Duration: 1 hour or less

Primary Concern: Fluid replenishment

What to Drink: Plain water or a low-carb electrolyte carbohydrate drink

What to Eat: Most people start with enough stored energy for a 60-minute workout, but carry a banana just in case you're out longer than expected or you start to fade.

Bonus Tip: For optimal recovery, eat a full meal within an hour of finishing an intense workout.

How to Fuel Medium-Length Rides

Ride Duration: 1 to 3 hours

Primary Concern: Carbohydrate replenishment

What to Drink: 2 bottles low-carb, electrolyte hydration drinks, at least

What to Eat: 30 to 60g of carb per hour from food.

Bonus Tip: Don't wait until you are hungry or thirsty to eat and drink. Take small nibbles and sips from the get-go.

How to Fuel Long Rides

Ride Duration: 3 hours or more

Primary Concern: Carbohydrate and electrolyte replenishment; food boredom or palette fatigue

What to Drink: 2 bottles low-carb, electrolyte hydration drinks, at least

What to Eat: 30 to 60g of carbs per hour, total. Digestion can get harder as rides get longer, so eat more solids at the beginning of the ride, and switch to blocks, chews, and other easily digested foods during the final part of the ride. Just be sure to drink plenty of fluid to chase down gels, so you don't get GI upset.

Bonus Tip: Supplement bars and gels with carb-rich, low-protein, moderate-fat "real" foods. Don't worry about specific amounts of protein or fat; just eat what tastes good so you keep eating.

OKAY riders, I hope this helps you figure out how much nutrition and hydration you might wish to take with you on your rides. Just remember, the beer AFTER the ride. See you next time. Until then,

Make Every Ride Epic,

Darryl