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Want to train like a Winter Olympics athlete? Here's what to eat, when and how often

1 HR 52 MIN AGO

By Jacqueline Howard and Michal Ruprecht



For athletes competing at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Italy, when and what they eat can be key ...



As some of the world's top athletes gather in northern Italy for the 2026 Winter Olympics, many may enjoy **the country's pasta and pizza** while sticking closely to their optimal nutrition routines and plans.

For many Olympians, knowing when and what to eat can be just as crucial as the hours spent training on the ice, snow or track.

Inside the Milan Olympic Village's main dining hall, where athletes and team officials gather throughout the day, there are various menus tailored to athletes' nutritional needs and cultural preferences. The scale of the operation includes preparing about 3,000 eggs and approximately 450 kilograms of pasta each day, according to **the Olympics website**.

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The main dining hall serves about 3,400 meals per day, across six food stations — and those meals go hand in hand with training.



Many Olympic athletes carefully plan and schedule meals for optimal support before and after exercise. (Andy Cheung/Getty Images)



At high altitudes and in cold temperatures, eating iron-rich foods and staying hydrated can help performance. (Patrick Smith/Getty Images)

Nutrition supports the “actual physical training” and fuels peak performance, said Kristen Gravani, a performance and food allergy dietitian at Stanford University who has worked with numerous Olympic athletes.

Of course, due to how active they are, most Olympic athletes probably consume and burn more energy than the average person. For instance, during his Olympic training, US competitive swimmer Michael Phelps claimed to consume **10,000 calories** in a day, and Jamaican sprinter Yohan Blake said **16 ripe bananas** every day were his secret for running.

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But calorie intake and **extreme eating habits** aside, there are some key practices in Olympic athletes' training and nutrition that the average person can emulate.

The intricacies of the dietary recommendations Gravani makes for highly active Olympians differ from what she would recommend for the average adult working a desk job, but she says the general public can still "get inspiration" from how Olympians eat.

When to eat

In high-stakes competition, nutrition — and the timing around it — can shape how well athletes train, recover and ultimately perform, said Dr. Dan Benardot, a **professor at Emory University** and registered dietitian who has been the nutritionist for several Team USA athletes.

"When I was working with the US marathon team ... I asked them, 'What's your eating pattern like?' And they said, 'Well, we wake up in the morning, we go for a morning run, we come back home, we have breakfast, something to eat.' And I said, 'Well, wait a second, don't tell me anything else. That's already a mistake,'" Benardot recalled.



When working with Olympic athletes, dietitians recommend fueling up before intense training.
(*Maria Fuchs/Image Source/Getty Images*)

One of the most important things an athlete can do in the morning is eat something before they start training, he said.

“Have a little something. It doesn’t have to be a lot. Just enough to have a normal blood sugar and hydration state,” said Benardot, who worked with US marathoners at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. “The next time I met with them, most of them gave me a hug. They said, ‘I’ve never felt so good.’”

What to eat

For the average person, Gravani also recommends a quick snack before exercise. But timing is just one piece of the puzzle; what that snack may be can make a difference for training and performance.

A preworkout snack

“A preworkout snack I love is a low-fiber fruit or crackers, and if there’s enough time before the training, then we can pair that with a small amount of protein or a small amount of fat. For instance, a banana with a little bit of peanut butter would be great,” said Gravani, who also serves as consulting sports dietitian at Stanford Medicine.

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For instance, you could slice bananas, place them in muffin cups or ice tray molds, add a spoonful of peanut butter on top of each slice and then freeze them to make **frozen banana peanut butter cups**.



Banana slices with peanut butter can be a nutritious pre-workout snack.

(Manuta/iStockphoto/Getty Images)

A postworkout snack

Gravani added that it's also important to also eat after exercise.

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“For postworkout recovery, I recommend a combination of protein and carbohydrates, with the carbohydrate ratio adjusted based on the endurance demands of the workout or sport,” Gravani said.

“A longer endurance-based workout requires more carbs, while a shorter or more strength-focused workout requires less,” she said. “Either way, a smoothie can be a versatile post-training option with a whey or vegetarian protein powder, fruit and liquid.”

Benardot sometimes recommends **beet juice**, which may improve fat metabolism, help **ease muscle soreness** and support recovery after a tough workout, he said.



Beet juice supplementation has been shown to help ease muscle soreness. Dan Benardot, a professor at Emory University and registered dietitian, recommends the juice for recovery. (CNN)

Beetroots have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, which could help reduce the inflammation and oxidative stress tied to muscle soreness. A **review paper published in the journal Sports Health** in 2021 suggests that beetroot

supplementation in the short term has the potential to accelerate recovery after exercise.

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In general, anti-inflammatory foods are beneficial for recovery after intense training for high-performance competitions like the Winter Olympics, said Jessica Arquette, an assistant professor and registered dietitian at Ohio University.

“The antioxidant vitamins A, C, E, the mineral selenium and omega 3 essential fatty acids are usually accepted as the main antioxidant and ‘anti-inflammatory’ nutrients. These can be found in a variety of foods, including colorful fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds and healthy fats such as salmon, flax and chia seeds,” Arquette, who works with elite athletes, wrote in an email.

“For beetroot, seems like most benefits are found as a precovery for athletes doing high-intensity and repeat sessions. From my perspective, there is not enough evidence to make any blanket recommendations, although it could certainly make sense for a high-performing athlete,” she wrote, referring to “precovery” as the period before exercise.

Other types of juices may have benefits as well, Gravani said.

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“Things like **tart cherry juice** or blueberry you’re seeing incorporated into more postworkouts for antioxidant benefits,” she said.

For instance, an **anti-inflammatory smoothie** might include tart cherry juice, pineapple, spinach and Greek yogurt.



Antioxidant and anti-inflammatory nutrients are found in certain fruits and vegetables. Tart cherry juice is one of those ingredients that can be mixed with pineapple, spinach and Greek yogurt to create an anti-inflammatory smoothie. (CNN)

Pair iron with vitamin C

The quality of food is equally important, especially for athletes who compete at high altitudes and in cold temperatures, Benardot said. He has worked with Team USA figure skaters, including some who are competing at this year's Olympic Games.

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Because air is thinner at higher altitudes, athletes "must develop an enhanced ability to capture oxygen in a lower-oxygen environment," Benardot said.

"To do this, it is important for athletes to consume enough nutrients that enable enhanced red blood cell formation," he said. "You need a little bit more iron, you need a little bit more [vitamin] B12, and you need a little bit more folic acid."

Iron, vitamin B12 and folic acid are important ingredients in production of hemoglobin, a protein in red blood cells that helps transport oxygen.

"Having slightly more of the right nutrients makes it possible for athletes to increase red blood cells so that they can capture more of the oxygen at high altitudes," Benardot said.

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Without these nutrients, the body cannot produce enough hemoglobin, contributing to inadequate blood oxygen levels. This can hinder an athlete's ability to burn fat for energy, resulting in premature fatigue.



Team USA's Amber Glenn selects breakfast items at the dining hall inside the Olympic Village in Milan, Italy, on February 3. (Antonio Calanni/AP)

"When people think about iron intake, they typically only think about meat, but if you change the absorbability of the iron in vegetables, you're good," Benardot said. This might be done by pairing lemon juice with an iron-rich vegetable such as spinach.

"The iron in vegetables is not highly absorbable, but if you add vitamin C — and lemon juice is high in vitamin C — vitamin C is a reducing agent," he said. "It reduces

the iron that it comes in contact with to a much more absorbable and metabolically useful form of iron.”

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In general, pairing foods high in iron with vitamin C-rich foods can help with absorption, Gravani said.

“Anything with vitamin C works,” she said. “It could be citrus-based, such as a lemon vinaigrette, but it could also be berries, broccoli or bell pepper, which are all also rich in vitamin C.”

‘Get a variety of colors’

When considering what to eat, Benardot and Gravani advise against having the same thing every day.

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“The first thing that I recommend for people is to vary your diet,” Benardot said. “As there is no perfect food, try to have as many different foods as possible. So if you had it yesterday, have something different today. If you had a green-colored fruit yesterday, have an orange-colored fruit today. They provide different phytonutrients.”

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And Gravani said she “always” emphasizes variety.

“I think people as a whole, even at the elite athlete level, get in a rhythm with their favorite or most convenient go-to foods. For instance, you may always eat veggies, but is it typically spinach?” Gravani said.

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“Being able to get a variety of colors and foods throughout the day provides different vitamins, minerals and antioxidants that can help with the recovery process and simultaneously support gut health, too,” she said. “One of the things I tell our Olympians is that even when focused at the highest level, food can still be fun.”

Arquette, an endurance athlete who has run the Boston Marathon eight times, says that eating a variety of healthy foods that offer “functional” benefits remains important.

These types of foods fall within the groups of “bone builders, blood builders, coenzymes and antioxidants,” she wrote. “I am a big yogurt fan, lean meats, citrus/berries, colorful veggies and starches like rice.”

Diversify protein sources

Benardot added that different sources of protein, at different times and not all at once, are another example of the importance of variability.

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For instance, consuming protein about every three to four hours, in doses of 20 to 40 grams each, has shown the most benefit for improving muscle growth and strength, according to the National Academy of Sports Medicine.

But it's important not to go overboard with too much at once. “Overdoing” the protein dose can raise the risk of dehydration, Benardot said.

How often to eat

Benardot and Gravani have encouraged Olympic athletes they work with to eat frequent small meals throughout the day instead of three large meals.

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“I definitely prescribe the small, frequent meals. Having three meals and two to three snacks, depending on the person and their needs, is usually better,” Gravani said.



Roasted salmon with wild rice and vegetables can be a nutritious meal for athletes.
(lacaosa/Moment RF/Getty Images)

"It prevents you from getting really hungry or really full in between. And I think that a lot of people do have that challenge," Gravani added. "To me, it's about getting that consistency and kind of having a little more stability with blood sugar throughout, rather than leaving those big gaps."

Frequent small meals can help reduce the blood sugar crashes that may happen after eating three large meals. **Low blood sugar** typically occurs about two to four hours after a meal.

NUTRITION TIPS TO HELP YOU EAT LIKE AN OLYMPIAN

- Fuel with a quick snack before morning workouts.
- Recover with protein and carbohydrates after workouts.
- Pair iron-rich foods with foods high in vitamin C.
- Eat more anti-inflammatory foods to help with muscle pain.

When Benardot recommends that athletes increase their eating frequency throughout the day, they sometimes worry that it could change their body composition or cause them to gain unhealthy weight, he said.

"What I tell people is, whatever you have for breakfast, don't eat it all at once. Take a little bit, have the rest mid-morning. Whatever you have for lunch, don't eat it all. Take a little bit, have it midafternoon. Whatever you have for dinner, don't eat it all. Have a little bit and the rest later in the evening. Then have a little snack before you go to bed, so that you can sustain blood sugar while you're sleeping," Benardot said. "This way they are eating what they ate before, but they are distributing it in a way that is more likely to sustain energy balance and improve nutrient utilization."



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