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What to Eat at a Meet: A #swimFASTERfood Q&A with our Nutrition Expert



By Kelly Jones, RD | Wednesday, August 9, 2017

USA Swimming recently launched a new campaign called #swimFASTERfood, to create a dialogue on what we serve at concession stands at youth swim meets. We have put together an all-star partnership that includes Chobani, MilkPEP, Olympic spokesperson Matt Grevers and registered dietitian Kelly Jones.

The focus of the campaign is on “what to eat a meet,” to prepare for performance on race day. We believe athletes may have treats and try many foods as part of healthy, well-balanced diet. So, donuts, hot dogs and nachos aren’t “off the table” so to speak, but we have other options for swimmers to consider on the day of a swim meet.

We sat down with registered dietitian Kelly Jones to talk about what to eat at a meet to swim your best.

Q: There are some ads on USA Swimming that say “Muffins or Medals?” Do we really have to choose between the two?

Kelly: Ha! Those ads meant-to-be fun and light-hearted and meant to create a conversation and inspire great choices at swim meet. The point is that the campaign is focused on what to eat at a meet vs. saying you should never have muffins. Even then, not all muffins are low nutrient and high-fat, though many are. The muffins sold at concession stands are often those from cost clubs that are very large, heavily processed with many additives to increase shelf life,

and contain a high amount of hidden fats. For this reason, if a team is hosting a smaller meet, it may be a good opportunity for a parent to whip up some muffins at home that are sweetened with maple syrup or honey, made with whole grain flour, and will contain lower fat levels to better support energy levels at the meet.

Q: When at a swim meet and preparing for performance, what happens in the body if a swimmer does eat a muffin instead of a protein bar?

Kelly: Many of the typical foods at concessions are very high in fat and very low in other nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals. While fat is a nutrient that everyone needs, having too much of it before exercise can slow digestion and the release of nutrients to the blood and muscle cells as an energy source. This can mean feeling sluggish before your race, and potentially getting stomach cramps or pains that impair performance. Swimmers will use some fat during races, especially endurance events. However, carbohydrates are the best source of energy to have in the muscles for high-intensity activity. Many of the current concession stand options aren't only high in fat, but rich in the type of fats that athletes should consume less of. For example, animal fats and fats used for frying aren't going to support energy levels, joint health, and muscle recovery as much as fats that come from plant foods – such as nuts, seeds, avocado – and fish, such as tuna.

Q: We hear a lot about calories. Is that the right thing to focus on when looking at what to eat from the concession stand at a swim meet?

Kelly: It isn't necessarily the total calories that matter as much as what the calories are composed of in terms carbs vs. fat, and how many nutrients the foods contain. For example, a 5-year-old and a 17-year-old may be going to the same concession stand, and they each need drastically different amounts of calories for a day at the meet. Highlighting the calorie content for them may be confusing and is only part of the picture. Typical concession stand items that aren't as nutritious can range in calories and grams of fat, including hot dogs (250-450 calories/15-25 grams of fat), soda (90-310/0), chips (150/10), nachos (600/25) and muffins (460/15). I prefer to focus on foods with better calorie composition and more nutrients. You can see that in our list of better foods for your swim meet, some calorie contents are comparable, but rich in healthy carbs and nutrients. Here's a great list for your next swim meet:

Food	Calories	Fat	Best For...
Fruit ex: banana	90-110 calories	<.5 grams fat	Pre-race
Granola bar	140	4	Pre-race
Bonk Breaker	220-270	6	Pre-race
Protein bar	240	9	Post-race
String cheese	50-80	2-6	Post-race
Trail Mix			
Chobani Low-Fat Yogurt (6 oz.)	140-170	1-3	Post-race
2% Milk (8 oz.)	120	4.5	Post-race
Baby Carrots (1 cup) and Hummus (2 tbsp)	100	5	Pre-race

Q: What do you think about having juice at a swim meet?

Kelly: 100% juices are an OK option in small portions, within 30 minutes before a race. Some swimmers do experience a bit of an upset stomach with too much fruit sugar without fiber from the whole piece of fruit.

Q: What do you think about eating veggies at a meet?

Kelly: This is a bit of a trick question, as I normally highly recommend veggies throughout the day for athletes, but I don't suggest them right before a race due to their high fiber content, which takes a while to leave the digestive tract. If you do have veggies at a swim meet, baby carrots or bell peppers with hummus a couple of hours before a race may be okay, but you'll want to add something like a whole wheat pita for more energy.

Q: Donuts seem to be at so many swim meet concession stands. What do you think of donuts at the swim meet?

Kelly: For swimmers, I recommend having a treat like a donut at the end of the meet after a well-balanced meal. Rather than look to donuts as a meal or snack by themselves, I encourage athletes to make it part of meal with a lean protein source, a quality starch and vegetables. If the swimmer does have it as a snack every once in a while, it's best to pair it with some protein so it doesn't impact their blood sugar and energy levels as negatively as it would on its own. For example, a donut with a handful of peanuts as a snack can fit into a normal day of healthy eating, but before or during a meet, it will not fuel the swimmer's races very well.

Q: What do you think of eating other typical concession stand items?

Kelly: It's okay to have a hamburger, cupcake or nachos as part of a healthful diet. We just don't want those foods to dominate the swimmer's diet, or to be the main source of fuel at a meet that the swimmers have trained so hard for. After the meet, it's okay to have a burger as the meat has protein and bun has carbs to help you recover, but due to the high fat content, balance it out with some cooked vegetables as your side so that your body gets antioxidants to support recovery, too.

Q: Many people perceive kids as being so resilient and having such a high metabolism that they can eat about anything. What do you think?

Kelly: Compared to adults, children burn more energy per pound of body weight over the course of the day, because they are still growing and developing. A child-athlete will use energy even more. You'll hear many adults say that they used to be able to eat whatever they wanted. This unfortunately is not the case, as what we eat early in life impacts both our future health and future dietary patterns and preferences as adults. Kids really need to ingest more nutrient-dense foods – foods that provide many nutrients for the amount of calories they contain. The vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals (more often known as “antioxidants”) in high-quality foods are what help the body use the calories we eat.

What questions do you have? We will select questions from Twitter if you tag #swimFASTERfood.

About Kelly

Kelly Jones is a registered dietitian, nutritionist and former NCAA Division I athlete who believes that eating real food and leading an active lifestyle are keys not only to physical health, but also mental health and happiness. Find more about Kelly at KellyJonesNutrition.com (<http://KellyJonesNutrition.com>), follow her blog at EatRealLiveWell.com (<http://EatRealLiveWell.com>) and follow her on Instagram and Twitter at [@KellyJonesRD](https://twitter.com/search?q=%40kellyjonesrd&src=typd) (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%40kellyjonesrd&src=typd>).



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