

The 15 Foods Runners Need Every Week for Good Health and Top Performance

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Most supermarkets stock more than 30,000 items, yet every time we race up and down the aisles of the grocery store, we toss into our carts the same 10 to 15 foods. Which isn't such a bad thing, as long as you're taking home the right foods--ones that will keep you healthy, fuel peak performance, and easily cook up into lots of delicious meals. So before your next trip to the grocery store, add the following 15 foods to your must-buy list. Then, when you get home, get them into your diet and onto your menu.

Almonds

Runners should eat a small handful of almonds at least three to five times per week. Nuts, especially almonds, are an excellent source of vitamin E, an antioxidant that many runners fall short on because there are so few good food sources of it. Studies have shown that eating nuts several times per week lowers circulating cholesterol levels, particularly the artery-clogging LDL type, decreasing your risk for heart disease. And the form of vitamin E found in nuts, called gamma-tocopherol (a form not typically found in supplements), may also help protect against cancer.

Add almonds and other nuts to salads or pasta dishes, use as a topping for casseroles, or throw them into your bowl of hot cereal for extra crunch. Combine with chopped dried fruit, soy nuts, and chocolate bits for a healthy and tasty trail mix. Almond butter is perfect spread over whole-grain toast or on a whole-wheat tortilla, topped with raisins, and rolled up. Almond butter with bananas is an excellent combination. Store all nuts in jars or zipper bags in a cool dry place away from sunlight and they'll keep for about two to four months. Storing them in the freezer will allow them to keep an extra month or two.

Eggs

One egg fulfills about 10 percent of your daily protein needs. Egg protein is the most complete food protein short of human breast milk, which means the protein in eggs contains all the crucial amino acids your hard-working muscles need to promote recovery. Eat just one of these nutritional powerhouses and you'll also get about 30 percent of the Daily Value (DV) for vitamin K, which is vital for healthy bones. And eggs contain choline, a brain nutrient that aids memory, and leutin, a pigment needed for healthy eyes. Choose omega-3 enhanced eggs and you can also increase your intake of healthy fats. Don't worry too much about the cholesterol: Studies have shown that egg eaters have a lower risk for heart disease than those who avoid eggs.

Add eggs boiled, scrambled, poached, or fried (in a nonstick skillet to cut down on the need for additional fats), anytime. Use them as the base for skillet meals such as frittatas. Or include them in sandwiches, burritos, or wraps as you would meat fillers. You can also add them to casseroles and soups by cracking one or two in during the last minute of cooking.

Sweet Potatoes

This Thanksgiving Day standard should be on the plates of runners year-round. Just a single 100-calorie sweet potato supplies over 250 percent of the DV for vitamin A in the form of beta-carotene, the powerful antioxidant. Sweet potatoes are also a good source of vitamin C, potassium, iron, and the two trace minerals manganese and copper. Many runners fail to meet their manganese and copper needs, which can have an impact on performance since these minerals are crucial for healthy muscle function. There are even new sweet-potato varieties that have purple skin and flesh and contain anthocyanidins, the same potent antioxidant found in berries.

Add sweet potatoes to your diet baked, boiled, or microwaved. You can fill them with bean chili, low-fat cheese, and your favorite toppings, or you can incorporate them into stews and soups. Baked as wedges or disks, sweet potatoes make delicious oven fries. Don't store sweet potatoes in the fridge because they will lose their flavor. Instead, stash them in a cool, dark place, and they should keep for about two weeks.

Whole-Grain Cereal with Protein

Look for whole-grain cereals that offer at least five grams of fiber and at least eight grams of protein. For example, one cup of Kashi GoLean cereal, which is made from seven different whole grains, including triticale, rye, and buckwheat, fills you up with a hefty 10 grams of fiber (that's 40 percent of the DV) and is loaded with heart-healthy phytonutrients. It also contains soy grits, supplying 13 grams of protein per serving. If you pour on a cup of milk or soymilk, you'll get 30 to 40 percent of your protein needs as a runner in one bowl. Other high-protein/high-fiber cereals include Nature's Path Optimum Rebound and Back to Nature Flax & Fiber Crunch.

Add whole-grain cereal for breakfast--a meal you don't want to skip since research indicates that those who eat breakfast are healthier, trimmer, and can manage their weight better than nonbreakfast eaters. Cereal also makes a great post-run recovery meal with its mix of carbohydrates and protein. Or you can sprinkle whole-grain cereal on top of your yogurt, use it to add crunch to casseroles, or tote it along in a zip bag.

Oranges

Eat enough oranges and you may experience less muscle soreness after hard workouts such as downhill running. Why? Oranges supply over 100 percent of the DV for the antioxidant vitamin C, and a recent study from the University of North Carolina Greensboro showed that taking vitamin C supplements for two weeks prior to challenging arm exercises helped alleviate muscle soreness. This fruit's antioxidant powers also come from the compound herperidin found in the thin orange-colored layer of the fruit's skin (the zest). Herperidin has been shown to help lower cholesterol levels and high blood pressure as well.

Add orange sections to fruit and green salads, or use the orange juice and pulp for sauces to top chicken, pork, or fish. And to benefit from the antioxidant herperidin, use the orange zest in baking and cooking, as with my Grilled Herbed Salmon recipe (above). Select firm, heavy oranges, and store them in the fridge for up to three weeks. Orange zest can be stored dried in a glass jar for about a week if kept in a cool place. Thoroughly wash oranges used for zest to avoid commercial fungicides and pesticides.

Canned Black Beans

One cup of these beauties provides 30 percent of the DV for protein, almost 60 percent of the DV for fiber (much of it as the cholesterol-lowering soluble type), and 60 percent of the DV for folate, a B vitamin that plays a key role in heart health and circulation. Black beans also contain antioxidants, and researchers theorize that this fiber-folate-antioxidant trio is why a daily serving of beans appears to lower cholesterol levels and heart-disease risk. In addition, black beans and other legumes are low glycemic index (GI) foods, meaning the carbohydrate in them is released slowly into the body. Low GI foods can help control blood sugar levels and may enhance performance because of their steady release of energy.

Add black beans for a quick, hearty soup. Combine a can of black beans with chicken or vegetable stock along with frozen mixed veggies and your favorite seasonings. Mash beans with salsa for an instant dip for cut veggies, or spread onto a whole-wheat tortilla for a great recovery meal. Add beans to cooked pasta or rice for extra fiber and protein.

Mixed Salad Greens

Rather than selecting one type of lettuce for your salad, choose mixed greens, which typically offer five or more colorful delicate greens such as radicchio, butter leaf, curly endive, and mache. Each variety offers a unique blend of phytonutrients that research suggests may fend off age-related diseases, such as Alzheimer's, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. These phytonutrients also act as antioxidants, warding off muscle damage brought on by tough workouts. You can usually buy mixed greens in bulk or prewashed in bags. Make every salad with at least three colors.

Add a mixed greens salad with tomato, cucumber, scallions, and an olive oil-based dressing (the fat from the oil helps your body absorb the phytonutrients). You can also stuff mixed greens in your sandwiches, wraps, and tacos. Or place them in a heated skillet, toss lightly until wilted, and use as a bed for grilled salmon, chicken, or lean meat. Greens store best in a salad spinner or the crisper drawer in your fridge for up to six days. Just don't drench them in water or they won't keep as long.

Salmon

Nutrition-wise, salmon is the king of fish. Besides being an excellent source of high-quality protein (you get about 30 grams in a four-ounce serving), salmon is one of the best food sources of omega-3 fats. These essential fats help balance the body's inflammation response, a bodily function that when disturbed appears to be linked to many diseases including asthma. A recent study showed that people with exercise-induced asthma saw an improvement in symptoms after three weeks of eating more fish oil. Atlantic salmon is a trout that is dyed red to look like salmon. It has no beneficial omega-3 fish oils and eat wild caught salmon for the highest level of omega-3's. If you've been limiting seafood due to possible mercury or PCB contamination, do not worry about salmon or cod. They are very low in mercury, but stay away from the tuna and shark.

Add salmon by baking, grilling, or poaching it with fresh herbs and citrus zest. Gauge cooking time by allotting 10 minutes for every inch of fish (steaks or fillets). Salmon should flake when done. Precooked (leftover) or canned salmon is great in salads, tossed into pasta, stirred into soups, or on top of pizza. Fresh fish keeps one to two days in the fridge, or you can freeze it in a tightly sealed container for about four to five months.

Whole-Grain Bread

Runners need at least three to six one-ounce servings of whole grains per day, and eating 100 percent whole-grain bread (as opposed to just whole-grain bread, which may contain some refined grains and flours) is an easy way to meet this requirement since one slice equals one serving.

Whole-grain bread may also help weight-conscious runners. One study showed that women who eat whole-grain bread weigh less than those who eat refined white bread and other grains. Whole-grain eaters also have a 38 percent lower risk of suffering from metabolic syndrome, which is characterized by belly fat, low levels of the good cholesterol, and high blood sugar levels. All this raises the risk for heart disease and cancer.

Add bread easily as it is ready to eat right out of the wrapper. Spread with almond butter or stuff with your favorite sandwich fillings and plenty of sliced veggies for a one-handed recovery meal. Coat with a beaten egg for French toast, or use as layers or crumbled in a casserole. Just be sure the label says 100 percent whole grain (all the grains and flours included in the ingredients should be listed as whole, not milled or refined). And don't just stick with the popular 100 percent whole-wheat breads. Try different varieties of whole grains such as barley, buckwheat, bulgur, rye, or oat.

Frozen Stir-fry Vegetables

Research shows that eating a combination of antioxidants, such as beta-carotene and vitamin C, may lessen muscle soreness after hard interval workouts by reducing the inflammation caused by free-radical damage. Most ready-to-use stir-fry veggie combos offer a potent mix of antioxidants by including red and yellow peppers, onions, bok choy, and soy beans. And frozen vegetable mixes save lots of prepping time but still provide the same nutrition as their fresh counterparts.

Add the frozen vegetables right into a hot wok or skillet, add tofu, seafood, or meat, your favorite stir-fry sauce, and serve over brown rice. Or throw them into pasta water during the last few minutes of cooking, drain, and toss with a touch of olive oil. You can also mix the frozen veggies right into soups or stews at the end of cooking, or thaw them and add to casseroles. Vegetables store well in the freezer for about four months, so make sure to date your bags.

Whole-grain Pasta

Pasta has long been a runner's best friend because it contains easily digestible carbs that help you restock spent glycogen (energy) stores. Whole-grain versions are a must over refined pastas because they contain more fiber to fill you up, additional B vitamins that are crucial to energy metabolism, and disease-fighting compounds such as lignans. And even better, pastas such as Barilla Plus offer whole-grain goodness along with heart-healthy omega-3 fats from ground flaxseed and added protein from a special formula of ground lentils, multigrains, and egg whites to help with muscle repair and recovery.

Add pasta as a complete one-pot meal--perfect for busy runners--when tossed with veggies, lean meat, seafood, or tofu. Or combine pasta with a light sauce, a bit of your favorite cheese, and turn it into a satisfying casserole.

Chicken

Runners need about 50 to 75 percent more protein than non-runners to help rebuild muscles and promote recovery after tough workouts. And just one four-ounce serving of chicken can supply about half a runner's daily protein needs. Along with protein, chicken contains selenium, a trace element that helps protect muscles from the free-radical damage that can occur during exercise, and niacin, a B vitamin that helps regulate fat burning during a run. New studies also suggest that people who get ample niacin in their diet have a 70 percent lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.

Add chicken in many ways as it is perfect for runners with little time to cook. You can bake, broil, grill, or poach chicken in broth. Leftover chicken works well on top of salads, mixed into pasta, or stuffed into sandwiches and burritos. Fresh chicken stores safely for two days in the fridge, but can be frozen for six months or more.

Frozen Mixed Berries

The colorful compounds that make blueberries blue, blackberries deep purple, and raspberries a rich shade of red are called anthocyanins--a powerful group of antioxidants that may help stave off Alzheimer's disease and some cancers. Anthocyanins may also assist with post-run recovery and muscle repair. Not bad for a fruit group that contains a mere 60 calories or so per cup. And remember: Frozen berries are just as nutritious as fresh ones, but they keep far longer (up to nine months in the freezer), making it easier to always have them ready to eat.

Add frozen berries as a great base for a smoothie and there's no need to thaw them. Once thawed, eat them straight up or add to some vanilla yogurt with chopped nuts. Or liven up your hot or cold cereal with a big handful. You can also bake berries with a nutty topping of oatmeal, honey, and chopped almonds for a sweet treat after a long weekend run.

Dark Chocolate

As a runner you deserve at least one indulgence--especially one you can feel so good about. Chocolate contains potent antioxidants called flavonols that can boost heart health. In one study, a group of soccer players had lower blood pressure and total cholesterol levels, and less artery-clogging LDL cholesterol after just two weeks of eating chocolate daily. Other research suggests that the chocolate flavonols ease inflammation and help prevent blood substances from becoming sticky, which lowers the risk of potential blood clots. But not just any chocolate will do. First off, dark chocolate (the darker the better) generally contains more flavonols than milk chocolate. Also, the way the cocoa beans are processed can influence the potency of the flavonols. Chocolate manufacturer Mars has developed a procedure that apparently retains much of the antioxidant powers of the flavonols, and their research shows just a little over an ounce (200 calories worth) of Dove dark chocolate per day has heart-healthy benefits.

Add dark chocolate to trail mix, dip it in peanut butter (my favorite), or combine it with fruit for an even greater antioxidant punch. Just keep track of the calories. Buy chocolate wrapped in small pieces to help with portion control.

Low-fat Yogurt

Besides being a good source of protein and calcium (one cup provides 13 grams of protein and 40 percent of the DV for calcium), low-fat yogurt with live cultures provides the healthy bacteria your

digestive tract needs to function optimally. This good bacteria may also have anti-inflammatory powers that can offer some relief to arthritis sufferers. Just look for the live-culture symbol on the yogurt carton.

Add low-fat yogurt over fruit, granola, or nuts, or used as a base for smoothies. Plain yogurt can be mixed with diced cucumber and herbs like dill and spread over grilled tofu, chicken, fish, and other meats. Yogurt can also double as a salad dressing with vinegar and herbs. Or mix it with fresh salsa to stand in as a dip for veggies and baked chips.

Simplify your diet with these fifteen foods. They are nutritious, healthy and enhance performance. These foods need to be on everyone's shopping list. Dr. DeFabio

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