

STAYING LEAN

Athletes come in all shapes and sizes, and everyone has their own 'best' shape. This may also change over time with growth, gain in muscle tissue and maturity. Carrying extra body fat can be a disadvantage for paddlers if it is restricting the ability to produce power and limiting overall fitness. Moreover, carrying excess body fat can indicate inefficient dietary patterns, which can have a greater impact on performance.

Losing body fat as an athlete is fundamentally different from weight loss in the overweight or obese sedentary public. Athletes are already lean by health standards and are required to produce high level physical performances daily at training. This reduces the flexibility with approaches to weight loss that will be successful for athletes. Despite this, many athletes try out some of what they see in the media, and go for the 'quick fix' or the current 'diet' craze in order to shed some excess body fat. For example, whilst a low carb diet (such as the Atkins diet) or a moderately higher protein diet (such as the CSIRO diet) may work for some inactive individuals, it will result in fatigue and reduced immune function in athletes because carbs are a crucial energy source for higher intensity exercise. But the advertising doesn't tell you that!

Losing body fat is usually a matter of small changes in energy intake and / or energy output – not a large differential between energy in and energy out. Large differentials generally lead to the body sending out signals to try and stop you – hunger initially, then if ignored tiredness, irritability, more 'flat' training sessions, reduced immunity to infections and illness, and mood swings. In females, it can also result in loss of periods (or amenorrhea). The overall result is a lowering of your metabolic rate, and usually some loss of muscle mass (as this active tissue is what contributes substantially to metabolic rate). The body will tend to then hold on to body fat stores, and in fact if you eat more than usual, it will have a great propensity to store body fat!

Contrary to popular belief, there is no good evidence that eating at night is physiologically

'bad' for you – in other words, there is no evidence supporting the "don't eat after 6pm" adage. The main reason why stopping people eating after that time helps them lose weight is because a lot of us eat most of our food in the evening. We tend to eat our largest meal at dinner, then hang around the kitchen picking on bits and pieces (either before or whilst cooking), and nibble on food while watching TV or relaxing or studying at night. The main problem is therefore behavioural – if you move half of that food consumed and spread it over the first half of the day, you tend to eat less in total because of a more satisfied appetite, and have a better metabolism and most likely feel better at training.

More unique to athletes is the use of dietary supplements such as sports drinks, liquid meal supplements (Protein plus) and sports bars. Focusing the use of these supplements to when they are MOST useful, instead of liberal use of them, can aid with body fat loss whilst maximising training potential. For example, few athletes recognise that a 600ml bottle of Gatorade is equivalent to 2 large bananas in energy content, or that one power bar has the energy content of a sandwich, but neither are as filling or 'satiating'. That doesn't mean you shouldn't use them however – instead, focus your use around your training sessions and discuss with your sports dietitian the most appropriate use of these products.

The main contributors to excess body fat are:

- Consuming excess total kilojoules - particularly at night
- Consuming excess saturated fat or alcohol
- Skipping meals - especially breakfast and lunch
- Eating for the wrong reasons e.g. comfort, stress, social occasions

Some simple tips to effective body fat loss include:

- Aim for no more than 0.5 kg loss in body weight per fortnight - a loss of lean muscle tissue may occur if weight loss is more rapid than this.
- Plan your food intake for the day to suit training sessions, and other work – avoiding

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large periods without food and / or a large intake of food at one time.

- Eat enough to ensure adequate energy for training and adequate carbohydrate to maintain blood glucose concentrations, and to satisfy your appetite.
- Get organized with your meals and snacks so you're not having to rely on high fat snacks (like chocolate and chips) to fill the gaps.
- Focus on effective recovery after training – see previous info sheet on recovery.
- Maintain hydration levels. Dehydration can sometimes be misinterpreted as hunger by the body. Drink regularly throughout the day, aiming for pale coloured urine.
- Decrease consumption of saturated fats, excess refined sugars and alcohol – these provide the highest kilojoule content for the lowest nutrient value. In particular, avoid having high fat meals or snacks (i.e. chips, potato chips, biscuits and cheese or dip) at the same time as alcohol – this may increase your chances of gaining body fat.
- Include some protein in most of your meals and snacks (e.g. meat, chicken, fish, eggs, nuts, legumes and dairy products). Protein helps fill you up so that you don't eat more than you require at one time.
- Become aware of, and change poor eating habits such as eating when bored, stressed, depressed, celebrating, or merely due to habit or social occasions.
- Allow planned "treats" to avoid any episodes of bingeing. A "treat" is something you eat once a week or once a fortnight, which may fall outside of your recommended food patterns. Examples include a nice bar of chocolate (go for quality, not quantity!), a small packet of chips, a fast food burger – whatever you feel is 'special' and you'll look forward to and enjoy.
- Include extra aerobic training sessions if necessary (e.g. walking, jogging, cycling) to assist in increasing energy expenditure.

- Have your body fat levels monitored regularly (e.g. skinfolds) – not just the scales.
- Drink water when you are thirsty, and use sports drinks and cordials sensibly – during and after training and during competition.
- If you're constantly hungry (and it's true hunger), then you may be trying TOO hard. You should be hungry in time for a meal or snack, but not ravenous at any point in time.
- Eat slowly, and allow time for your stomach to register that you've eaten before you go back for more. Stop eating when you feel satisfied. If you feel overly full within 20-30mins of finishing a meal, you've eaten too much.
- Eat more in the early part of the day. Many people try too hard early in the day to "be good", leaving themselves short and then ravenously hungry later in the day. Move food forward more so that you're in control and can eat a lighter meal than usual at night.
- Manage your use of sports supplements to maximize recovery after training, without excessive use.
- Avoid the low carb option – carbs are a very important fuel and should be included at each meal and snack.
- Never follow any crash diets that you see advertised, read about in magazines or hear about from someone unqualified!

Remember! All food is morally neutral!