



Previously: technology

This one: nutrition

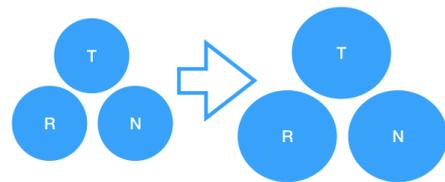
Next: the long run

Hopefully you're getting into a bit of regular training now, you're managing your time and body reasonably well, and the running is gradually building up. And if that's the case, you may be feeling fatigued or generally wondering how to stay fuelled and full of the right kind of energy.

So, it might be useful to talk about nutrition, and I've split this into two. This first one talks about nutrition in general, and later there'll be something about fuelling and drinking on race day. As you'll expect by now, the headlines are that it's individual, there's no magic answer, and you should keep it simple. Maybe I should just copy and paste that for every note...

It matters

The visual is adapted from some England Athletics material. The idea is to keep the three circles in balance - T(raining), R(ecovery) and N(utrition).



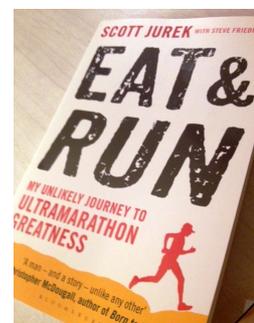
As you increase the focus you put on training, increase it for the other two as well. Don't triple your training load without also tripling your efforts on recovery and nutrition, and put extra thought into how you eat and drink - what you consume, when, and in what quantity. If one circle gets bigger, so do the others.

I don't want to make it too serious. As with everything else, it's important to do what's manageable, and don't beat yourself up because it's not perfect. But you risk your training falling apart if you don't give your body what it needs to respond.

You are what you eat (and drink)

It's a cliché, but you are, very literally, what you eat. Your body can only work with what it's given, and it can only process energy and repair tissues if it has the right materials.

I'm not a nutritionist, so if you want particular recipes (or have any individual requirements) then speak to a specialist or a GP.¹



¹ A reasonably accessible way into to the topic is through material written by Anita Bean. In particular, she's good at debunking claims made by manufacturers of sports nutrition products and supplements. <https://anita-bean.co.uk/my-books/>

As for previous topics, I'll cover some basics and encourage you to rely on common sense and personal preference, and be suspicious about what you're sold.²

Basics – macronutrients

The basics. In crude terms, think of food and drink in three groups ('macronutrients'):

- Carbohydrate('carbs') – fast-burn energy from sugars, potatoes, pasta, grains.
- Fat – slower release energy, from oils, cheese, meat and fish
- Protein – for repair, from nuts, dairy, some vegetables and pulses, meat

This is just a very simple way of thinking about it, but that's probably enough for now. Quick energy, slow energy, recovery. You need all of them.

Food is fuel

For energy and exercise, you need to fuel your body. Quick-release fuel (processed or sugar-rich foods) will give a short spike (and then possibly a crash). That might be fine for a sprint or a sharp interval session, but you really need to sustain effort for a longer period. So look for slow-release fuel – wholegrain rice, pasta, quinoa, cereals, or potatoes. In technical terms, this is the 'GI' score.³

Typically, you'd eat a reasonable amount of such foods across most meals, but if you've got a particularly heavy session coming up, try to get this type of food on board at least two hours beforehand. But remember that what you eat, your body has to process (so a huge meal before a training session may be a risk unless you know there are toilets en route).

Fats are needed too, especially given that the majority of your training is likely to be at a relatively low intensity. However, most people already have enough fat in their bodies to fuel at least one marathon, and there's no need to consciously put extra into your diet.

Recovery and the Magic Hour

Every time you run, you damage your body. To adapt and recover (and therefore get fitter), your body must repair and rebuild itself. That means protein.

There's a 'magic hour' after a session, when you should try to get some recovery food on board. Ideally something with a decent amount of protein, but also some carbs to restore your energy levels. Plenty of recognisable foods (e.g. milk) contain

² You can find a suitably sceptical view from 33Fuel at <https://www.33fuel.com/marathon-nutrition-guide/> A slight disclaimer is that I'm currently chatting to 33Fuel about a potential podcast.

³ <https://www.gisymbol.com/about-glycemic-index/>

protein, you don't need to spend a fortune on powders or drinks. If you think you need a special protein drink after every session then you're clearly more wealthy than me, and you're also pushing yourself too hard in sessions. You can get what you need from some peanuts, a chunk of cheese, or a milkshake.



Carb loading

People in marathon prep use more energy than those who aren't. So surely they should eat lots of carbohydrates? Huge bowls of pasta, potatoes, cake? Yes and no.

You could look at how Kenyan runners do it. They've been dominant in distance running over recent decades, and there's a small town called Iten where many of them live and train. When I was there, I saw how they fuel themselves – rice and beans, *ugali* (maize porridge) with *sukuma wiki* (spinach or kale). And lots and lots of sweet tea. A simple diet, repetitive, essentially vegetarian. Lots of starch and carbs, but importantly, it's made from basic ingredients rather than out of a packet. It works for them.



So in broad terms, a diet that contains a fair amount of non-processed carbs does have a lot to offer. But that doesn't mean eating only carbs. That doesn't mean that every type of carbohydrate is equally beneficial. It certainly doesn't mean endless pasta. But it does mean you're providing the essential fuel your body needs.

There are alternative views. For example, some people recommend a high-fat, low-carb ('paleo') option. My non-expert view is that while it's worth people cutting down *processed* carbs (white bread and white sugar, high-GI, spike-and-crash), the paleo approach is fairly evidence-free. Of course, it's personal, so if you're tempted to try it, then do so for a week, and see if it gives you what you want.

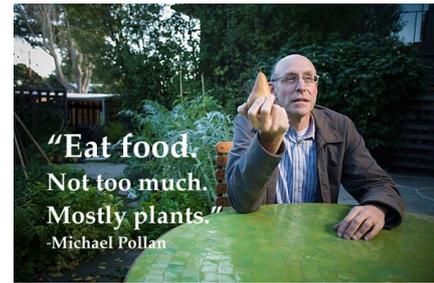
Seven words

The food writer Michael Pollan has a mantra for describing what people should ideally eat:⁴

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

What he means is:

- *Eat food* – not something that's been processed to resemble food, what Pollan calls 'edible food-like substances'. Make things from original ingredients, or at least make sure you can recognise what's on the label.
- *Not too much* – as with running, think about quality rather than just quantity.⁵
- *Mostly plants* – even though you'll be doing your body damage and needing to repair it, that doesn't mean you need to eat more meat than you do already. Many elite runners are virtually vegetarian, such as the vegan ultra-runner Scott Jurek, and those speedy Kenyans.⁶



DIY and keep it simple

Probably the biggest point here is simply to avoid processed foods. If you're not a cook, learn some simple recipes.⁷ Take something basic and customise it. It doesn't need to take long, and it doesn't have to be anything unsuitable for sharing with others.



Some simple ideas to show good food can also be fast:

- Jacket potato with cheese and baked beans
- Porridge with raisins, honey, ginger, or whatever you want to throw in there
- Wholegrain pasta with broccoli and tomato
- Omelette with onions and herbs, or a bit of salad

⁴ His book *Food Rules* expands on this, with other guidelines such as 'If it's a plant, eat it. If it was made in a plant, don't' and 'Don't eat breakfast cereals that change the colour of your milk'. And an important final rule, 'Break the rules once in a while'.

⁵ It's also important not to eat too little. Persistent underfuelling can lead to weight loss and to some degree there may be short-term gains. But it's not a wise approach, and there's increasing attention now on 'Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport' (RED-S), for men as well as women. See <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/health/reds-symptoms-eating-disorder-overtraining-underfuelling-a4294196.html>.

⁶ See *Eat and Run: My Unlikely Journey to Ultramarathon Greatness* by Scott Jurek (2013). I've been vegetarian as long as I can remember. You can also look up Kilian Jornet, Lizzy Hawker and Fauja Singh (the oldest marathon runner in the world). I'm not arguing that being vegetarian directly makes you a great runner. But thinking more about your food choices could improve your running, and *may* also lead you towards a diet that's lower in meat.

⁷ For ideas: <https://www.rebeccadent.co.uk/nutrition-articles/2017/3/22/how-to-find-recipes-meal-and-snack-ideas>

Iron and other supplements

As with many areas of training, people make this overcomplicated and there's an industry based on flogging supplements to people who don't need them. If you eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and veg, you don't need supplements.⁸ You could take a multivitamin, but that's psychological as much as physiological.⁹

Associate Professor Ken Harvey from the department of epidemiology and preventive medicine at Monash University told the ABC's Four Corners there's little evidence to suggest multivitamins actually work.

Buying multivitamins benefits the companies that manufacture them by boosting profits, but for the average Australian multivitamins provide "no benefit".

"What you need is a good diet, you're pissing the money down the toilet for no benefit," he told the program.

However, it's worth considering iron tablets, especially for women. High-mileage training can damage red blood cells (when feet pound on hard surfaces). And even without this, some women can be prone to anaemia or related symptoms, especially during their period. You may find you get all you need from spinach, broccoli etc., but a preventative measure is to take iron tablets. It's absorbed more easily if it's accompanied by vitamin C, so a tablet with orange juice would be a good daily routine.

Given that it's a pretty dark time of year at the moment, you might also try Vitamin D supplements (although if you make a point of getting outdoors as much as you can, especially on bright days, you may get all you need from daylight).

And the only other supplement which appears to be building an evidence base is beetroot - either juice or tablets.¹⁰

Beware of superfoods and special diets

It's more the case in relation to race-day nutrition, but there are a lot of products and brands which claim to have some special magic. Be cautious if you see words like 'superfood' flashed around in relation to baobab, quinoa etc. Yes some of those products are genuinely beneficial, but so are everyday ingredients like turmeric, ginger, garlic, spinach and avocado. Things don't have to be exotic or cost a lot of money. As with almost everything else I say in these notes, don't look for the complex and expensive solution when the answer lies in simplicity and common sense. Cheap, familiar ingredients can be just as super as anything else.

In particular, I'd be wary of any diet extreme enough to have a name of its own (keto, paleo, 5-2). I'm not going to get into fine detail but if you're not already experienced with any of those approaches, then mid-marathon period is not the time to go down

⁸ Don't think it's just about 'five a day' - I've heard it suggested that endurance athletes need ten helpings.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/feb/14/multivitamins-a-waste-of-money-and-just-create-very-expensive-urine>

¹⁰ Beetroot played a role in the 'sub-2' Nike project <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/06/secrets-two-hour-marathon-men-alter-running>

that road. It's important to stay strong, healthy and energised, able to fuel your training load while still functioning as a human being.

Reality bites

As with everything about your marathon preparation, be realistic. There's no need to cut out everything you enjoy, and there's no need to eat anything special because you're training more.

Many of us cook and eat with family and will want to share meals with them – that's fine, and important. Apply the 80/20 rule. If you can be reasonably good 80% of the time, then enjoy the 20%. Don't cut yourself off from the pleasures of food (and drink) and the situations in which you share them with others.

So focus on slow-release carbs, good quality protein, and ingredients you can recognise and afford, rather than so-called 'superfoods' or strange concoctions. And if you find you're getting in tune with your body, you'll find you start to know what you need, because that's what your body's craving. If you fancy cheese, it's because your body wants fat and protein. If you fancy chips, it could be carbs and salt.

Listen to your body, learn what works, and don't take it too seriously. Nothing needs to be cut out entirely. To adapt something from one of my favourite books¹¹, enjoy everything in moderation (including moderation itself).

Marathon training places an increased load on the body, and it's important to provide appropriate fuels and the materials needed for repair. But as long as a sensible balance is maintained, there's no need for anything extreme – either in terms of the things you include, or the things you reduce.

The usual three points to finish:

- You're demanding a lot from your body, give it what it needs
- Focus on carbs and protein + lots of fruit and veg
- But no need to consume anything unusual. Real food not pseudoscience, quality rather than quantity.



¹¹ *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton (1933), a story about Shangri-La. This was the inhabitants' recipe for living an exceptionally long and active life.