Okay to eat sugar-filled foods before sporting activities? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is eating glucose based food good for you before sports?

Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Here’s the sweet and simple answer — some glucose, when paired with protein, fat, or fiber, is helpful before vigorous [2] or longer durations of physical activity. Research shows that having a combination of high levels of carbohydrates, medium levels of protein, and low levels of fat slows down digestion to ensure there is adequate energy to keep you moving. Consuming sugary foods, drinks, and sweets without other nutrients may lead to energy spikes and crashes or hypoglycemia [3]. Luckily, there are a variety of nutritious food combinations to keep the body fueled while staying fit!

Ideally, it’s best to eat one to three hours before physical activity to boost energy most effectively. Some snack ideas include:

- Whole grain bread with peanut or seed butter
- Banana or apples with nut or seed butter
- Greek yogurt with fresh or frozen berries
- Oatmeal with low-fat milk (dairy or non-dairy) and fruit
- Nuts, raisins, and seeds

It may also be of interest to look into the glycemic index of different snacks [4]. This measurement indicates how quickly blood sugar levels will rise as the body digests food. For those fueling up before physical activity, foods with low to moderate glycemic indices are recommended, as it will help keep blood sugar stable. Additionally, being thoughtful of carbohydrate choice can also help prepare the body for physical activity, choosing complex carbs (such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables) over refined carbs (processed grains such as white bread). Not only do natural sugars provide more sustained energy, they are paired with more nutrients. On the other hand,
foods with added sugars can spike the blood sugar and often don’t provide as much nutritional value.

All in all, a little bit of sugar, such as the amount naturally found in fruit, may be a good pre-workout snack — especially when paired with fiber, protein, and fat, as they can help provide more energy. However, keeping overall sugar levels low may help prevent health issues associated with eating too much sugar.

For more personalized feedback on types of food to fuel your physical activity, it’s best to talk with a dietitian or health care provider to help create a plan for healthy eating that will supplement physical activity. In addition to think about what food you eat, you can also think about the types of training and ensuring hydration to improve athletic performance. For more information on healthy eating and physical activity, check out the Nutrition & Physical Activity section of the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Keep up that sweet curiosity about healthy eating!

Alice!

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