

FACT SHEET

FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT – DISTANCE WALKING

ABOUT RACE WALKING

Long Distance Walking and Race Walking is regularly completed by novices to elite Olympians. Olympic race walking events are the 20km and 50km taking about 1 hour to 3.5 hours, while athletic Race walking events range from 3km to 50km. Other events (such as charity walks) range from 20km to 100km taking a variety of times depending on the fitness and experience of the walker (average time on Oxfam 100km walk is 28-32 hours). There are also very long distance walks such as the Camino trail in Spain which is ~800km where an average of 20-35km is walked per day, up to 4 weeks.

Terrains involved in long distance walking are many and varied including official walking tracks to paths, roads, hills and bushland. Race walking events are generally conducted on walking tracks or roads and are looped tracks to allow for judging.

Race walking is not only a timed race, the technique of the walker is also judged. One of the walkers' feet must be in contact with the ground so that no visible (to the human eye) loss of contact occurs and the advancing leg must be straightened (i.e. not bent at the knee) from the moment of first contact with the ground until the vertical upright position.

If you are new to long distance walking do not underestimate the importance of training and nutrition to build strength and stamina that is required for spending a long time of your feet. Training also allows you to ensure you have appropriate foot wear and equipment and practice nutrition and fluid strategies to meet your individual needs for the big event.

Long distance walking can be done on your own or as a team (which is a prerequisite in many longer walks for safety issues). It can be done without aids or with the use of poles such as in Nordica walking.

TRAINING DIET

Training for a long distance walking often occurs 6-7 days per week, sometimes twice per day at the elite level. However, training may also include other aerobic cross-training such as cycling which reduces the load on the walking muscles, as well as weights and stretching to build strength, stamina and reduce chance of injury.

Due to the high demands of training and the reliance on muscle fuel stores, appropriately timed and sufficient carbohydrate is imperative. Ideally, meal plans should match the nutrition needs of lighter training days with extra snacks and larger meal portions on heavier training days to meet the additional requirements for quality training sessions. Additional snacks should be nutrient rich carbohydrates such as fruit, wholegrains or dairy foods.

It is worth discussing with your Accredited Sports Dietitian whether 'training low' (occasionally training with depleted muscle glycogen stores) for some sessions is beneficial.

FLUID NEEDS

In race walks, technique is imperative, so athletes need to maintain a high level of concentration throughout the event. Dehydration can impair concentration and overall performance. It also increases body temperature and heart rate, increasing perception of fatigue.

Fluid needs can vary depending on body size, gender, the weather, fitness and intensity of the exercise so a general fluid guide is difficult. The aim is to start any exercise session or competition well hydrated. This requires drinking regularly throughout the day leading up to training or competition. Having a drink with all meals and snacks is a good start. During the walk, fluid should be taken regularly with sports drinks or electrolyte replacement considered in the lead up to, and during the event to ensure walkers are adequately hydrated.

While hydration levels are important, it is also important to avoid over-hydrating which can occur more often in less trained walkers. Understanding your individual sweat losses and hydration needs is important for developing an individualised hydration plan – an Accredited Sports Dietitian can help with this.

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EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

To ensure adequate body glycogen stores in the few days before the event eating carbohydrates at each meal is important. Depending on the length of the race, carbohydrate loading may be beneficial ensuring the right balance of fibre foods to reduce the chance of GI upsets.

Eating two to four hours before events allows food to be digested before the event starts. The meal or snack eaten before an event should be carbohydrate based to provide a final top up of muscle fuel stores before the event. Ideally, pre-event eating should be practiced in training to ensure tolerance – it's never wise not try new foods/drinks or supplements in competition!

Some suitable examples of pre event meals include:

- Breakfast cereal with milk and fresh fruit
- Bircher muesli with yoghurt and berries
- Porridge with sliced banana + almonds
- Raisin toast with peanut butter
- Baked beans on toast
- Toasted ham and tomato sandwich

If solids don't sit well or an early start prevents eating a meal or snack before a walk, a liquid source of protein and carbohydrate such as a fruit smoothie or meal replacement liquid can be a good option.

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

The aim of fuel and fluid during an event is to top up fuel levels for optimal endurance, skill, concentration and to avoid dehydration and gut upset. It is important to always trial fuel and fluids during training to understand what suits each individuals circumstances and preferences.

As race walking is completed over a 2km loop, this allows for easier access to fuel and hydration stations at pre-determined points. Water, sports drinks and gels are usual options provided a feeding/aid stations.

For other events, walkers need to be self-sufficient and carry water and foods in a backpack. Depending on the length of the event, there are often checkpoint stops that allow for food to be dropped off and/or for support crews to provide additional food and fluid on course.

With a lower intensity walk there is more opportunity to eat as there is less chance of gut upset and fewer difficulties eating 'on the move'. Foods eaten throughout the event should be carbohydrate based and lower in fat for easier digestion. Small amounts of protein can help to avoid hunger. Setting an alarm as a reminder to eat regularly is a useful strategy to avoid 'hitting the wall' (running out of muscle fuel).

It's important to have a variety of foods available, especially in longer walks as flavour fatigue can set in after several hours of walking if food choices are not changed. Sweet and savoury options should also be considered to enhance palatability and appeal of food.

Hydration needs vary between individuals. Developing an individual fluid plan and aiming for pale yellow urine when walking will help to avoid dehydration.

RECOVERY

There are three golden rules in recovery nutrition:

- Refuel muscle glycogen (carbohydrate stores)
- Repair muscle (for function & development)
- Rehydrate (replace fluids lost through sweat)

Recovery meals and snacks should contain carbohydrate (fuel), some protein (for muscle repair and development) and plenty of fluids and electrolytes to replace sweat losses. A recovery meal or snack should be consumed soon after the walk, particularly if next training session or competing again soon. Fluids should also be consumed, based on estimated losses to rehydrate.

Some recovery food suggestions include:

- Chicken, avocado and salad focaccia
- Chocolate milkshake or flavoured milk tetra pack
- Yoghurt + muesli with nuts and seeds
- Burritos with beef, cheese, avocado and salad

OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- **Be organised** It is essential to plan ahead if needing to be self sufficient with food and fluid during the course - an Accredited Sports Dietitian can help.

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