Completing a marathon takes months of training your legs as well as your stomach. Nutrition before, during, and after your long runs is just as important as “getting the miles in.” Preventing dehydration and low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) is key to a successful marathon.

So what should you eat for optimal performance? For starters, eat a high carbohydrate diet every day throughout your training, including the last week prior to your marathon. This high carbohydrate diet (55-65% carbohydrate) enables glycogen stores to be replenished and maintained, thus helping to prevent “hitting the wall.”

Before the big day, be sure you have eaten your pre-marathon meal prior to one of your training runs. Always eat and drink familiar foods before a competition. Your pre-run meal should consist anywhere from 50-300 grams of carbohydrate, depending on how close to running you are eating. If it is a larger meal, leave up to three hours for digestion. If you are eating a smaller, easy to tolerate snack or fluid, you can consume this within the hour before your run or event.

Know what the marathon water stations will provide for beverages and if you choose to take them, be sure you have trained with them. Drink 4-8 extra glasses of fluid during the 2 days prior to the event. Drink at least 16 ounces up to 2 hours before and drink 4-8 ounces every 15 minutes during the marathon. Be sure to do this during your training also. This is the only way to train your intestinal tract too!

During your long runs that will last more than an hour and during the actual marathon, you should be consuming 60 grams of carbohydrate per hour. This can be through liquid or solid. There are plenty of sports drinks, gels, and sports bars available, but there is nothing wrong with a handful of jellybeans or Fig Newton’s (less expensive also), if that is what you can tolerate best! The key here is to test these foods during your training runs so that there will be no surprises on marathon day. By taking in these carbohydrates during the event, you will help to prevent low blood sugar and maintain your energy level.

It has been shown that the most effective way to prepare in the week prior to the marathon is to change the training, not the diet. This means you will be tapering your runs, but continuing to eat a high carbohydrate diet (carbohydrate loading) in the week prior to the marathon. By doing this, your muscles will have the opportunity to become fully fueled. Foods that are high in carbohydrates include pasta, potatoes, cereals, breads, bagels, English muffins, crackers, and pancakes. Be sure to read labels for carbohydrates.

In order to avoid or minimize chronic fatigue after strenuous exercise (such as your long training runs or the actual marathon!), it is crucial that you replace muscle glycogen stores. The only way to do this is to make sure you eat within 30 minutes of a long run, speed workout, or hill workout. You should consume 5-7.5 grams carbohydrate/pound plus 10 grams of protein. The sooner you refuel, the sooner your muscles will recover. If you just don’t feel like eating anything, at least drink something with a good source of carbohydrate and protein, for example, chocolate milk, carnation instant breakfast, or a drinkable yogurt.

Remember, it’s the physical training and the nutritional training that is essential to a successful marathon. On marathon day, your job is to prevent dehydration and maintain a normal blood sugar level. Don’t try anything new, stick with what worked during training and feel assured that your body is well fueled for the 26.2 miles!

For a personalized marathon meal plan where a dietitian can calculate your individual carbohydrate needs or if you have questions regarding your training diet, please call 663-DIET.

Sources:
– Nancy Clark’s Food Guide for Marathoners, Nancy Clark, MS, RD, 2007