



Runner's Diet

EDIBLE REMEDIES

Stay healthy—or get better faster—with supercharged healing foods and drinks.

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Image by James Worrell

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Runners know that wearing sunscreen lowers their chance of developing skin cancer, and that carrying an inhaler can combat a midrun asthma attack. What many don't realize is that what we eat and drink also protects us from these and other health issues. While not meant to replace medicine, some foods and beverages can help decrease risk of certain diseases or ailments, as well as reduce symptoms if they occur. "From stress fractures to infections related to training, the right food choices can be just what the doctor ordered," says dietitian and marathoner Jackie Dikos, R.D. To boost the healing power of your next meal, stock your pantry or fridge with these nutritious prescriptions.

HEALTH CONCERN: STRESS FRACTURES

What begins as a barely-noticeable crack in a bone can progress into chronic pain—and a season-ending fracture.

SLICE AVOCADO A 2008 University of Buffalo study found that runners who suffered the most stress fractures consumed significantly fewer calories from fat than noninjured runners. "Runners who restrict their fat intake may not eat enough calories to keep up with training demands," says Dikos. Dietary fat is also needed to absorb fat-soluble nutrients, including [vitamin D](#), necessary for bone health. Focus on healthy unsaturated fats from avocado, nuts, seeds, and olive oil.

POUR MILK A 2008 study in the *Journal of Bone and Mineral Research* reported that female Navy recruits who took extra calcium and vitamin D for eight weeks had 20 percent fewer stress fractures than women who consumed less. "The body uses calcium to build and repair bones, while vitamin D is the primary regulator of calcium absorption," says Dikos. Milk is one of the few foods that contains this bone-building duo.

HEALTH CONCERN: IRON DEFICIENCY

Iron helps carry oxygen to muscles, so low levels make you less aerobically efficient, reducing your endurance. "Iron

depletion isn't that rare in runners," says Dikos, who explains you can lose the mineral through the GI tract, sweating, and menstruation.

SEAR PORK TENDERLOIN The "other white meat" has iron levels similar to those of its beef counterpart but at an easier to swallow price. You also end up with a third less fat on your dinner plate along with way more thiamin and riboflavin—two B vitamins that are involved in energy production from food.

CHOP RED BELL PEPPER The body absorbs up to 33 percent less of the iron found in plant foods (such as beans, lentils, tofu, [whole grains](#), and spinach) than the type present in meat. But eating these plant-based iron sources with vitamin C changes the iron to a more easily absorbed form. Red peppers contain more vitamin C than most other veggies and fruits—including oranges.

HEALTH CONCERN: EXERCISE-INDUCED ASTHMA

Even runners who have no other triggers can experience an exercise-induced asthma attack, which constricts your airways, making it difficult to breathe.

BREW COFFEE Good news for those of us who like a prerun [java jolt](#): An Indiana University study discovered that asthmatic runners who were given caffeine (1.4 to 4.1 milligrams per pound of body weight) one hour before exercise experienced less wheezing, coughing, and other asthma symptoms. Caffeine may relax airway muscles, making it easier to breathe.

GRILL SALMON The heart-friendly [omega-3s](#) found in fatty fish, such as salmon, mackerel, sardines, and trout may help reduce airway narrowing, making it easier to breathe during exercise, according to additional research from scientists at Indiana University. Omega-3s help squash the release of inflammatory compounds. Aim for at least two servings of fatty fish per week, or consider taking a daily 1,000-milligram fish-oil supplement.

HEALTH CONCERN: INFLUENZA

Hard training temporarily weakens the immune system, leaving you vulnerable to the sniffles and chills.

SPOON YOGURT A study of distance runners published in the 2008 British Journal of Sports Medicine found that taking probiotics daily for one month can more than halve the length of time you experience symptoms of an upper-respiratory-tract infection. The beneficial bacteria boost levels of an immune system molecule that is a key player in fighting viral infections. To be sure the yogurt you're eating contains probiotics, look for the "Live & Active Cultures" seal.

BITE APPLES Quercetin, a flavonoid found in apples, as well as grapes, onions, and tea, may lessen runners' susceptibility to upper-respiratory infections, which often occur during periods of intense exercise. The 2008 study from the University of South Carolina found that quercetin, a potent antioxidant, appears to stymie the replication of viruses in the body. All of an apple's quercetin is concentrated in the skin, so leave the peeler in the kitchen drawer.

HEALTH CONCERN: SKIN CANCER

Exercising outside exposes runners to a regular dose of ultraviolet rays—a major initiator of cancer- and wrinkle-promoting skin-cell damage.

NIBBLE BRAZIL NUTS They're nature's richest source of selenium, a mineral with antioxidant properties that may lessen ultraviolet radiation skin damage. In fact, according to a 2009 Australian study in the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*, higher blood levels of selenium may reduce skin cancer risk by as much as 60 percent.

STEEP GREEN TEA In a 2009 study, researchers at the University of Alabama concluded that green tea is packed with polyphenols that may protect against UV-induced tumor development by reducing skin inflammation and DNA damage.