



FUEL THE RUNNER

Run with Purpose, Fuel with Knowledge!



fueltherunner

How to fuel for a success

By James Fleming MSc, SENr, Founder at Fuel the Runner, April 2025



With just under 40 days to go until the Halstead & Essex Marathon, you should use the next few weeks to develop and practice your nutrition strategy ready for the race. Fueling the body is a bit like putting fuel in your car. If you add the wrong type of fuel or worse, no fuel at all, then your performance will be severely affected.

So why is nutrition so important for marathon performance?

A high quality, nutritious diet is just 1% of a runner's development, yet it is the 1% that can have a huge impact on the other 99%. When planned well, nutrition has been shown to have a number of benefits including:

- 1. Optimising performance on race day;** helping you to hit your target time or even a PB!
- 2. Recover effectively;** helping you to reduce muscle soreness and fatigue ready for your next long training run and keeping your legs fresh for race day.
- 3. Enhance training adaptation;** marathon training places huge demands on the body and nutrition can help to further enhance adaptations – helping you to run faster for longer.
- 4. Reduce the risk of injury and illness.**

Therefore, the purpose of this blog is to help support you with your race day nutrition to ensure you get over the finish line.

With a few long runs left before the big event. It is vital to practice your race day strategy. I have worked with numerous runners who for previous events, changed what they ate and drank on race day compared to what they had trained with and as a result, they suffered with a stitch or gastrointestinal distress (GI) (upset stomach) and ruined their chance of a PB.



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So, what should you eat before the race?

Carbohydrate is the main source of fuel for the body during exercise, however we only have limited stores; enough for around 2 hours of high intensity exercise. Therefore, you need to make sure you start your run with energy stores at optimal levels.

Fueling starts 2 to 3 days before the marathon itself right up to the morning of the race. For this article I will focus on fueling during the 24 hours before race start. You can practice this strategy during your long runs.

Race Day – 1 (RD-1)

This is the day before your long run or the race itself. The purpose of this day is to load the muscle with fuel ready for the run the next day.

This can be done by consuming high carbohydrate meals and snacks throughout the day e.g. Breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, mid afternoon snack, dinner, pre bed snack.

Example carbohydrate-based foods include:

- Rice
- Pasta
- Bread
- Potatoes
- Cereals and porridge



Carb based snacks include:

- Cereal bars
- Fruit (dried as well as fresh) and fruit juices

An example run day – 1 (RD-1) nutrition strategy may look something like this:

COMPETITION DAY -1 EXAMPLE PLAN: 70KG RUNNER

7am	10am	1pm
Bowl of porridge + milk	2 x slice of toast	Chicken pasta
Glass of orange juice	Tin of beans	Garlic bread
		Flavoured milk
60g CHO	90g CHO	150g CHO

4pm	7pm	10pm
Smoothie	Large chicken + Rice	Bowl of cereal
Yoghurt	2 x cereal bars	
Banana		
80g CHO	150g CHO	30g CHO



Race Day (RD)

As you will start running the Halstead Marathon from 9.30am onwards I would recommend starting your long runs at a similar time so that you get used to running and eating around that time.

Fueling for a marathon or long run starts around 3 hours before the start. As the time before the start of the race or run decreases so should the amount of food you consume. Having a high carbohydrate-based meal around this time allows time for the food to digest without increasing the risk of a stitch or you feeling sick. Keep your pre run meal high in carbohydrate but low in fibre and fat as they take longer to digest and may increase the risk of GI distress.

High carbohydrate snacks such as cereal bars, sports drinks and fruit in the 60 to 90 mins before race start help keep fuel stores topped up.

An example race day nutrition strategy may look something like this.

RACE DAY EXAMPLE PLAN: 70KG RUNNER

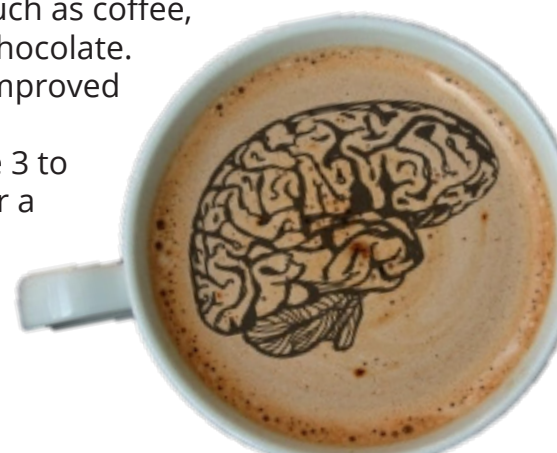
5am	8am	Race Start
3 x Weetabix + milk	3 x slice of toast + Jam	Optional carbohydrate gel/sipping on sport drink
Glass of orange juice	Smoothie	
Banana		
110g CHO	90g CHO	30g CHO

Is there any supplements that may help with the run?

It is just as important to practice using any sport supplements during training too. There are hundreds of supplements currently available for purchase. There are 2 that I would recommend to use:

1. Caffeine

This is one of the only supplements with strong evidence to show benefits on exercise performance. It is found in a range of foods such as coffee, cola energy drinks (beware of the sugar content) and chocolate. Caffeine acts on central nervous system, it promotes improved reaction time, concentration and reduction in fatigue perception. Current recommendations are to consume 3 to 6 mg per kg body mass 60 minutes before exercise. For a 70kg this would be 210mg, this is a similar content to a double espresso.



2. Dietary Nitrate in the form of concentrated beetroot juice

Nitrate is found in a range of leafy green veg such as spinach, kale, rocket and beetroot. A key effect of dietary nitrate is that it reduces the oxygen demand of exercise, meaning the muscles need less oxygen to maintain a given work rate, thereby improving exercise efficiency, fatigue resistance and exercise performance – perfect for those PB chasers!.



Nitrate consumption has been shown to result in a 1 to 3% improvement in time trial performance (IOC supplement statement, 2018). The optimal dose is 400-800mg nitrate for 3 to 6 days before an event then a final dose 2 to 3 hours before race start. If you want to order some more Beet It shots, use this link <https://bit.ly/JFBEET25> and use the code 'JFBEET25' To get 25% off your orders.

My pre-race nutrition tips:

1. Use the next few weeks to practice with different meals and quantities to help you work out what's best. Every runner's nutrition strategy is different, some foods work better for some than others so please focus on your nutrition rather than copying others.
2. PRACTICE YOUR RACE STRATEGY AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE – during high intensity exercise such as running, runners are susceptible to 'runners' gut' due to the physical movement of the stomach and intestines, physiological strain due to a reduction in blood flow to the intestine as well as nutritional factors such as hydration, fat and protein. I will talk more about 'runners' gut' in another blog coming up.

Fuelling the Halstead Marathon

As mentioned, we only have limited energy stores within the body (enough for roughly 90 minutes to 2 hours of exercise) so we need to make sure we keep it topped up to help complete the event itself.

What is available on the Halstead & Essex Marathon course?

Some runners like to run with hydration packs but on the course itself you will have access to a range of nutrition resources at regular intervals throughout the event.

Nutrition available on course:

- Water is available every 2 to 3 miles in ecofriendly cups
- High 5 energy gels are available at miles 9, 14.5 and 21

In your remaining training runs, I would recommend trying the products on offer on the course as they are sweeter than some of the gels or drinks you may have used previously and are not to every runner's taste.



Fueling during the run

Providing you have consumed plenty of carbohydrate in the days leading up to the event itself, the muscle stores will be topped up ready for the start of the race.

On your way to the start line and holding pens, it would be beneficial to sip on water or sports drinks or maybe a small carb-based snack such as a gel, sports drink, or fruit such as a banana.

At the start of any race, all runners are very nervous so once your race starts focus on getting into a good running rhythm and hitting your target pace for the rest of the course. As you are running, your 'fuel tank' will be starting to deplete so you need to think about nutrition sooner rather than later. A good guideline is to start fueling after about 30 minutes and then at regular intervals throughout the race.

It is recommended to consume around 30 to 60g carbohydrate per hour during prolonged exercise. There is further evidence to suggest higher amounts, closer to 90g per hour may result in greater performance too, however this is a lot to take in and can increase the risk of 'runner's gut' if not practiced before during training. This is why it is so important to practice your race day nutrition during training where you start with small amounts and gradually increase it.

What does 30g carbohydrate look like?

Carbohydrate is found in a whole range of food and drinks. Some examples of options that contain 30 grams of carbohydrate includes:

- **500ml sports drinks**
- **1 large banana**
- **1.5 energy gels***
- **1 x cereal bar***
- **A handful of jelly babies**
- **1 scoop of powdered carbohydrate mix**

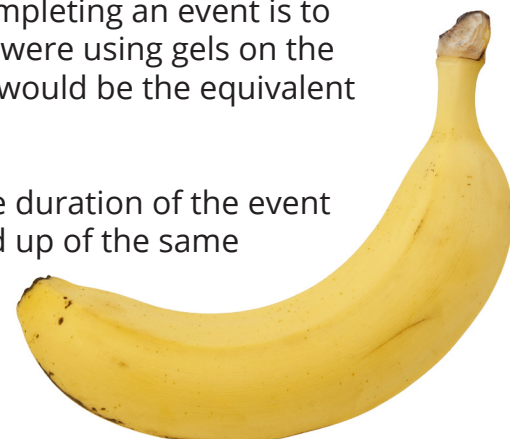


*Please be aware carbohydrate content between sports drinks, cereal bars and gels depending on brand.

After completing the first 30 minutes of the event, I would recommend to start taking on some fuel. It is up to you what you use but make sure you practice with it in training and then stick to it on race day. I have worked with a number of runners where they have mentioned that in previous events, they have tried different foods and as a result struggled to perform in their event.

The key to a successful nutrition strategy and successfully completing an event is to focus on consuming small amounts on a regular basis. If you were using gels on the day and trying to hit around 60g carbohydrate per hour, this would be the equivalent to consuming one energy gel every 20 minutes.

Some runners are happy to consume the same thing over the duration of the event but some runners experience food fatigue where they get fed up of the same thing. A simple way to help manage this is to mix up your snacks with different flavoured gels or swapping to other carbohydrate sources such as a handful of jelly babies.



Should I consume any other supplements during the race?

As mentioned caffeine takes around 60 minutes to be absorbed within the body and can be maintained for a few hours. Consuming caffeine during the latter stages of the marathon may help with sustaining your pace as caffeine helps reduced fatigue and perceptions of pain).

In terms of nitrate, as mentioned this takes around 2 to 3 hours for the body to digest and can last for up to 6 to 12 hours. There will be no need to consume additional nitrate during the marathon provided you have consumed your nitrate (1 to 2 shots of Beet It Sport Nitrate 400) 2 to 3 hours before the race as well as in the days leading up to the event for further enhanced benefits.

How much should I drink?

Staying hydrated during the race is just as important as consuming carbohydrate. Prolonged exercise can result in you becoming dehydrated which will start to make it harder to sustain your running splits and you will begin to slow down.

You can work out your sweat rate during your training runs using the following equation:

$$\text{Body weight pre run (kg)} - \text{Body weight post run (kg)}$$

Example: Record your weight in minimal clothing before completing your run. Once finished weigh yourself again in minimal clothing. If your weight has reduced by 1kg you know your sweat rate is around 1 litre per hour (1litre = 1kg). Please note sweat rate calculations are not 100% accurate but give you a much better idea of what is happening.

My top nutrition tips for during the race:

1. Practice your nutrition strategy for on the day during your training runs over the next few weeks so that you have time for your gut to adapt.
2. Depending on your finish time target you may be running for a number of hours and as a result trying to take more than 10 gels with you can be difficult to store and adds extra weight. Therefore, ask your friends, family and any supporters you have coming on the day to hold onto extra drinks, gels and resources. That way you can pick some extras up if needed. When I ran the London Marathon last year, this worked very well for me.





ABOUT JAMES

James is a Sport and Exercise Nutritionist. He has an MSc in Sport Nutrition from Loughborough University and a BSc in Sport Science from Brunel University. He is listed on the Sport and Exercise Nutrition register (SENr) too. James has recently launched Fuel the Runner, an online nutrition support programme designed for runners of all levels and abilities who want to enhance their running performance using the power of food and nutrition. You can find out more about James and Fuel the Runner via his website <https://www.jflemingnutrition.co.uk/fueltherunner> and you can follow him on Instagram and Facebook: JamesFlemingNutrition, @Fueltherunner or get in touch: jflemingnutrition@gmail.com.



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