

## HOW TO EAT THE DAY OF COMPETITION

A few weeks ago, a coach contacted me about her athletes who bombed out at a recent competition. Her gymnasts were lethargic and slow moving the morning of their competition. After the meet, a parent mentioned that one of the girls had eaten sausage biscuits and hash browns for breakfast, and another only had a Pop-Tart. Both of these are highly processed, fat-laden food options and offer virtually no nutritional value to an athlete.

How many times have you or one of your athletes bombed at a competition because of eating fast foods or the lack of a proper "pre-competition" meal?

I get this question frequently, by both parents and athletes. It has come to my attention that each kid is different, so it is challenging to create an exact plan for each athlete; however, there is a basic formula that I like to follow when recommending a meal plan for the day of competition.

Normally the issue is that most athletes will compete, at some point, during a time when their bodies aren't used to training. For instance, some kids who train normally in the evening may have early-morning competitions, while others who are used to training in the early morning or afternoon find themselves in evening competitions. This can really throw an athlete off in terms of food selections.

**Here are some general guidelines when prepping for competition day:**

### **1. DO NOT eat a large meal filled with fat within an hour of competing.**

Foods such as french fries, hamburgers, fried meat, muffins, donuts, and pastries (yes, Pop-Tarts) are laden with fats! These fats are slow digesting, which means it takes your body a lot of energy to process them! This will slow up any athlete no matter how fit she may be! After eating a high-fat meal, people are tired, slow, and lethargic! This is NOT the way to go into a competition! Stay away from sausage biscuits, gravy, whole eggs, burgers, and fries before a competition.

### **2. Load up on complex carbohydrates the morning and evening before a competition.**

Complex carbs are SLOW-releasing sugars that will give an athlete sustained energy throughout the day, unlike simple sugars, which will give a quick burst of energy then a quick decline. My favorite options for slow releasing sugar (complex carbs) are...

Oatmeal with honey and a side of egg whites or whole grain toast with natural peanut butter. If you are competing later in the day, brown rice, quinoa, green veggies, and sweet potatoes are my favorites for slow-releasing energy that will keep any athlete alert, energized, and fueled.

### **3. Water consumption is crucial!**

Regardless of what time of day your athlete competes, water consumption both the day before and morning of competition day are essential to athletic performance. Being properly hydrated is very important for cellular and muscular function as well as muscle endurance. I recommend athletes drink a MINIMUM of 72 ounces of water per day. I have found that sometimes kids aren't finding the energy to get through their routines, and it has nothing to do with food and everything to do with their bodies being dehydrated, especially in warmer climates. Make sure the DAY BEFORE competition your

gymnast has drank a full 72 ounces!

#### **4. Light meals and snacks an hour before competition.**

I don't know many athletes who like to compete on a full stomach. For a quick burst of energy, a light snack about an hour to an hour and a half before competition time yields excellent results. This should be composed of a simple sugar (natural) such as a fresh or dried fruit and nut or whole-grain snack such as a rice cake with light dairy and or fruit. My favorite choices are rice cakes with natural peanut butter or dried fruit such as apricots or raisins and nuts, grapes, and apple slices. Avoid large amounts of fruit a few hours before competition as this can also be disastrous to the gastro-intestinal system. Know your body and pick the foods that your body can tolerate!

#### **5. When competing very early, gymnasts should avoid a huge breakfast and try to get in a lighter but nutrient-dense breakfast filled with complex carbs, fruits, and protein.**

My favorite option would be a plain Greek yogurt with dry oats, honey, and berries blended into the yogurt. Here you have your complex carbs, protein, and simple sugars for an energy-filled morning.

Another great option would be an egg white omelet with peppers and a little bit of cheese with a slice of whole grain toast and a small amount honey. Skip the butter and syrup for breakfast before a meet. One more breakfast option would be a few scrambled egg whites and a half a cup of oatmeal or a slice of whole-grain toast and two tablespoons of almond or peanut butter with a touch of honey.

#### **6. Gymnasts should lightly snack between events on carrot sticks, nuts, dried edamame, coconut shreds, berries, or whole grain rice cakes.**

These options provide simple, quick sources of energy. They should avoid large meals like sandwiches and burgers -- or useless processed snacks such as pretzels, chips or popcorn -- during competition. These will make them feel tired, heavy, bloated, and gassy! Keep it light and nutrient rich with apple slices, grapes, and organic cheese sticks.

#### **7. For later-day competitions, always start with a good breakfast.**

This should be composed of complex carbs such as oats and whole grains or eggs and a little healthy fat such as avocados or hummus. A decent-sized lunch should include plenty of protein, fruits, veggies, and a complex carbohydrate. Also bring a protein-rich snack such as a few tablespoons of cottage cheese or hummus with celery sticks and whole-grain crackers. NEVER eat fast food right before a competition, unless you want to bonk out before your last tumbling pass!

***Betsy is a personal fitness and gymnastics trainer certified in Sports Nutrition.***