

Do I Need to Drink Sports Drinks During My Runs?

Proper hydration for running is essential to safety and performance, but runners need to know when they should consume sports drinks and when plain water will suffice.

Sports drinks, such as Gatorade or PowerAde, contain electrolytes such as sodium and potassium. When you're running, your body loses electrolytes through sweat. Since electrolytes help your body retain fluids and may prevent muscle cramps, you need to replace them when running more than 90 minutes.

Runners who don't sufficiently replace electrolytes during long runs or races can risk over-hydration. Hyponatremia, which is low blood sodium concentration, can occur when athletes drink excessive amounts of water and don't replace salt lost through sweat.

The basic rule of thumb for hydrating during runs is 6 to 8 ounces of fluids every 20 minutes. During runs of more than 90 minutes, you can alternate between sports drinks and water. So, every other hydration break, you should be drinking a sports drink. For shorter runs, hydrating with plain water is fine.

Another benefit of sports drinks is that they contain carbohydrates. Since it's necessary to consume calories during runs of longer than 90 minutes, drinking a sports drink will help you take in some of these needed calories. Some runners find that it's sometimes easier to get their calories through liquids rather than solid foods, especially during the later stages of a long run or race.

Do I Need to Eat During My Runs?

When you run for under 90 minutes, most of your energy comes from stored muscle glycogen. If you're running for longer than 90 minutes, the sugar in your blood and liver glycogen become more important because your stored muscle glycogen gets depleted. Fueling with carbs during your longer runs will prevent you from running out of energy and help boost your performance.

One way to get carbs on the run is through sports drinks. Solid foods can be tolerated, but they need to be small and easy to digest. There are numerous products on the market, such as energy gels, bars, and even sports jelly beans, designed for long-distance runners to eat on the run. Some runners prefer to eat pretzels or sugary candy such as gummy bears or candy corn. Start experimenting with different foods, gels, and bars on your long runs to see what you prefer.

So how much do you need to eat on the run? A basic rule of thumb is that you should be taking in about 100 calories after about an hour of running and then another 100 calories every 40-45 minutes after that. You may need more depending on your size and speed, so make sure you carry an extra one or two gels (or other food). If you feel hungry or low on energy, you can definitely consume calories "off-schedule".