

Managing Food and Fluids

Your club's annual century is coming up, and you've been training well. You're pretty sure you can ride the distance. You're not so sure, though, about how to fuel the effort so you don't run low on energy or, worse, bonk and finish at a crawl.

Endurance on rides longer than 75 miles depends more on your food and fluid intake than your fitness. Most century riders who slow markedly in the last 25 miles do so not because they lack endurance but because of fueling mistakes.

Now we know that during each hour of a long ride we need the caloric equivalent of one large bottle (28 oz.) of carbohydrate-rich sports drink plus one energy bar. This totals 300-350 calories. Contrast that with a 7-hour ride I did years ago when out of ignorance I drank only 4 21-oz. bottles of water, one Coke and ate around 500 calories worth of fig bars and pastry. I was at least 5 bottles of fluid and 1,500 calories short of the mark.

Fuel Up Smartly

Use sports drinks. On long rides you should consume both water and sports drink, but the proportion should lean heavily toward the latter because it's a carbohydrate source, not just a fluid source. The usual recommendation is to drink one 28-oz. bottle per hour, but this varies with the weather and your size. The bigger you are and the hotter or more humid it is, the more you should drink.

Drinking water along with a sports drink tends to dilute the carbs in your stomach and delay the rate of stomach emptying, but this usually isn't a significant problem. It's worth risking optimal absorption in order to rinse away the cloying sweet taste after couple of swigs if it's bothersome. So much the better if you find a sports drink that doesn't leave you wanting to rinse after drinking it!

Carrying enough fluid is difficult on long rides. Unless there are convenient reloading points along the course, the best solution is to use a back-mounted hydration pack. It's your choice whether to put water in the pack and sports drink in the bottles or vice versa. Perhaps a stronger case can be made for putting the drink in the pack because ice can be used to keep it colder longer. It's more palatable to drink warm water than a warm, sweet drink. Also, it helps keep sticky stuff from dripping onto your bike.

Eat solid food. Some ultramarathon cyclists can do long rides, including the 3,000 miles of the Race Across America, on liquid meal replacement products. No solid food to speak of for 8-10 days of hard riding. There's no need to use such an extreme diet for typical long rides like centuries or even double centuries. You'll get an adequate number of calories if you down the equivalent of one energy bar (about 225 calories) per hour along with a bottle of sports drink. Of course, feel free to eat any food you like better as long as it's rich in carbohydrate and supplies enough calories.

Generally, the cooler it is, the easier it is to eat, and the more food you will crave. European racers, competing in cold and wet Spring Classics, have traditionally eaten small sandwiches (known as panini) made of bread, jam, cream cheese and ham, individually wrapped in foil. That might sound like a heavy, indigestible ration — unless it's sleeting and the race is 160 miles long. Or it might sound good to you.

Set a reminder. Food won't do you any good if it stays in your jersey pocket. It's surprisingly easy to forget to eat often enough (or at all) when you're in an event. An effective solution is to set your watch's countdown timer to beep every 12 or 15 minutes as a signal to eat and drink.

For more great resources of cycling nutrition advice, check out our [Nutrition](#) section in the RBR eBookstore, which includes two very helpful titles from [Coach John Hughes, Nutrition for 100K and Beyond](#), and [Eating & Drinking Like the Pros](#) (which includes a number of recipes for both food and homemade sports drink).