

Runners Tummy

Many of our runners suffer from varying degrees of runners tummy - whether it be cramping, feeling unwell, needing a porta-loo (right now!) or all of the above. It can be caused by lots of different factors and the cause is a very difficult thing to pin point. Because we are all so different physiologically, there isn't a "one size fits all" approach to dealing with this annoying condition.

Why does it happen?

This is a common condition with runners. Some studies show that up to 50% of athletes suffer from this, you are not alone!

Intense and endurance exercise causes a redistribution of blood flow away from the gut to the working muscles and skin. This lack of blood flow is thought to be the main contributor to gastrointestinal symptoms. Although very individual, *nutritional training* and *appropriate nutrition* for your own body as well as *correct feeding strategies* can help improve and minimise symptoms.

Which food causes problems?

Food sensitivity is very individual and those that suffer from gastro stress while running may find a variety of foods trigger their symptoms.

Foods high in fibre and fat have been found to aggravate the gut during intense running. In normal day-to-day training, high-fibre foods are vital for a healthy gut but fibre is not easily digested and slows gastric emptying. As a result, foods high in fibre such as grainy bread, bran-based cereals, fruit and vegetables can all contribute to gut problems during an intense training session or in a race.



Foods high in fat can also slow gut transit and could also be another potential culprit. **High concentrated levels of carbohydrate taken during exercise is a commonly reported trigger to discomfort** while undiagnosed intolerances like **lactose** could be an underlying trigger to runner's tummy.

Foods **high in fructose** have also been associated with a greater risk of unsettled tummies as well as **dehydration**. Interestingly, some studies have shown that drinks that have *both glucose and fructose* can help reduce symptoms.

Tips on how to reduce the potential occurrence of runner's tummy

- Keep a food and symptoms diary. This may help you identify any trigger foods.
- Trialling ingesting food and drink during endurance training sessions is vital to assess tolerance.
- Follow a **low-fibre diet 24-48 hours before a race**.
Fibre is important as it promotes bowel regularity - opt for *low fibre* not *no fibre*.
- **Eat refined carbohydrates such as toast, wheat pasta and white basmati rice and also limiting the amount of fruit and vegetables 24-36 hours before you race** can also help reduce gut problems.
- **Avoid foods high in fat on the day of racing or intense training.**
- **Keep hydrated.** Although many runners feel that drinking while running may aggravate their gut, dehydration can be equally detrimental. Running and drinking is not easy, but if you practise this during training, maintaining hydration should contribute to a more settled gut. Start your session with your body “topped up” with water.
- **The gut is trainable**, so practise, practice practice!
- **Ensure your main meal is no less than 2-3 hours before your long run.** You may want something small to eat an hour before you race, but you will need to practise to find out what you can tolerate.
- If you suspect a lactose (dairy) intolerance consult a dietician. Plenty of lactose-free alternatives are available in supermarkets. You will need to check, though, with a healthcare professional to ensure you are getting enough calcium. Don't eliminate any food group without consultation.
- **Don't stress!**
If you do suffer from runner's tummy, the anxiety it can cause, coupled with pre-race nerves can have you lining up for the portaloos time after time. Try relaxation and self-talk techniques and perhaps try a light run before your race to get your bowel moving before your race.



Other Useful Resources:

Sport's Medicine (Auckland New Zealand)

[Gastrointestinal Complaints During Exercise; Prevalence, Etiology and Nutritional Recommendations](#)

Runners World: [How to avoid Stomach Problems while Running](#)

Runners World: [Avoiding Gastric Distress During Runs and Races](#)