

How do you fuel up?

The Boston Globe

Athletes resort to pickle juice, gummy bears, and more to boost performance on hot days

By Shira Springer, Globe Staff | June 22, 2009

Pickle juice popsicles, anyone?

For some athletes, nothing says hot-weather workout savior like popsicles made from the briny, green liquid. The combination of water, salt, vinegar, and flavorings can replace essential electrolytes lost during exercise on hot, humid days. Freezing the juice takes away some of the ick-and-eww factor and adds some refreshing fun.

Most athletes will gamely pucker up for improved performances, and pickle juice in liquid form is gaining popularity as well.

The maker of Pickle Juice Sport, a dill-flavored sports drink promoted as a way to prevent muscle cramps, says it supplies several dozen teams and more than 100 pro athletes. Philadelphia Eagles head trainer Rick Burkholder credits natural pickle juice with a win over the Dallas Cowboys when on-field temperatures reached 109 degrees at Texas Stadium during the 2000 season opener.

"It's been a hidden secret," said Pickle Juice Sport president Brandon Brooks. "Teams didn't want to divulge the secret because it's an edge on the competition."

No longer a secret, pickle juice joins chocolate milk, Ensure, sweetened condensed milk, coffee, coconut water, sugar cubes, and gummy bears on a growing list of surprising foods and beverages athletes use before, during, and after games and lengthy workouts to improve performance and recovery.

Elite triathletes have long filled water bottles with baby food. Marathoners might carry mini candy bars for refueling on long training runs. Cyclists stuff cooked, salted potatoes down their jerseys for long rides.

Such high-sodium, high-carb, and often high-calorie foods are not meant for exercise enthusiasts heading off for an easy midday jog or making a quick after-work stop at the health club. But the body needs easily-digested carbohydrates, electrolytes, and fluids to counter the effects of relatively intense workouts lasting 90 minutes or longer. Nutritionists recommend that professional athletes and weekend warriors alike experiment and find what works for them.

For athletes who experience problems with dehydration and cramping, salt often alleviates those issues. Post-exercise recovery foods should include a carbohydrate-protein combination like chocolate milk has. The more variety the better, because endurance athletes often experience flavor fatigue.

Research shows that some natural food options can be more nutritionally effective than heavily-marketed sports drinks, energy bars, and gels. Many are more cost effective as well.

"There's nothing magic about the engineered foods," said sports nutritionist Nancy Clark, who has counseled members of the Red Sox and Celtics as well as Olympians and college athletes. "There's nothing you can't get through real food. Inside the box, tends to be the engineered foods. I encourage my clients to think outside the box."

With the current economy, athletes may find an outside-the-box approach adds value, nutritionally and otherwise. Well-known sports drinks and foods can be an expensive proposition when compared with natural food alternatives. Gatorade's chocolate nutrition shakes generally cost around \$3 per 11-ounce can. Chocolate milk generally costs around \$3 per 64-ounce carton.

Athletes going long distances need simple, easily digested carbohydrates to refuel. Nutritionally speaking, that translates to sugars. On long runs, marathoners might carry cookies or other sweet treats as alternatives to energy gels.

"I've been using sugar cubes a lot with my athletes because there is the cost factor," said sports nutritionist Leslie Bonci, whose clients include professionals and Olympians. "In this day and age . . . you have to give people choices where they don't have to spend a fortune."

While gels may contain added electrolytes and performance-boosting caffeine, it often comes down to a matter of personal preference. Palatability and practicality play big roles. Some athletes like the crunch of sugar cubes over gooey gels. Some like conveniently packaged gels over gummy bears pulled from linty pockets.

"The longer you go, everybody is looking to build up this repertoire of food you can get down and have stay down," said sports nutritionist Suzanne Girard Eberle, a former US 5,000-meter track champion and avid cyclist and climber.

She stressed that training time is when athletes should experiment with different foods and beverages, adding: "No foods are off limits, if used appropriately. There's the whole cookie pile, the candy pile. . . . I'm an endurance athlete, so I don't find these bizarre."

Understanding the nutritional logic behind athletes' surprising choices helps. Pickle juice and its close cousin sauerkraut juice, as well as mustard, are all high in sodium. Sodium helps the body retain fluids. When the body keeps enough fluid in muscles, it helps eliminate cramping. At ultra-marathons, there might be salt shakers and extra salty potato chips at refueling stops.

Pickle juice provides athletes a two-for-one with sodium and fluid in one shot. The average pickle spear contains 220 milligrams of sodium versus 110 milligrams in an 8-ounce bottle of Gatorade. Since natural pickle juice should be consumed in small doses, nutritionists advise that athletes supplement with other fluids.

"In all fairness, the taste is kind of debatable, but it works," said cyclist Christian Helmig, who last year won the pro division of the Hotter 'N Hell Hundred, a ride held every August in Texas, while slurping Pickle Juice Sport. "It helps with the cramping and helps you to play harder and longer on the hot days."

Coconut water, the clear liquid in young, green coconuts, has long been popular in places like Brazil. It naturally contains 15 times more potassium than most engineered sports drinks. Working in concert with sodium, potassium helps with fluid balance and proper muscle function. In the United States, coconut water has been marketed as a "natural sports drink."

Athletes have also repurposed Pedialyte and Ensure as sports drinks, correctly figuring products designed for opposite ends of the age spectrum had something to offer. Another kids' drink - chocolate milk - is popular after workouts for its proven power to aid recovery.

"It's something I picked up while I was here and I stuck with it," said Patriots cornerback Terrence Wheatley. "I don't really get as sore as I used to now that I've started doing it. Hopefully, a mixture of that and Gatorade helps."

Boston Breakers forward Jennifer Nobis drinks chocolate Slim-Fast, a low-calorie protein shake, after workouts, and she notes that female pro athletes have to watch their calorie intake and weight differently than their male counterparts. "I can notice a difference when I do use it or I don't use it," said Nobis.

"It's what works for each person, and there's a lot to say about the psychological benefits of some of the things we do," said registered dietitian and 2008 US Olympic Marathon trials qualifier Jackie Dikos. "If it gives you a psychological edge, that's good, too."

While there is sound science behind many unusual food and drink choices, Dikos added: "If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. I would hate for people to think, 'I'm going to drop three minutes by starting a gummy bear regimen.' And I hope people don't take it to the extreme."

Consuming a Halloween-size bag of gummy bears or jar of pickle juice at one time can do more harm than good. Above all, exercise moderation and common sense before you head out the door.

Shira Springer can be reached at springer@globe.com. ■

I & R S U W K V I I I 7 K H I H Z I < R U N 7 I P H M & R P S D Q
I