

SPORTS GELS

What does it do?

1 of 4

- Sports gels are a highly concentrated source of carbohydrate (65–70% or 65–75 g/100 ml) in a form (“honey consistency”) that is easily consumed and quickly digested. Sports gels provide a compact and portable source of carbohydrate which can easily be consumed immediately before or during exercise to contribute to carbohydrate intake targets.
- Carbohydrates consumed during exercise can support or enhance performance via two different mechanisms: **provision of fuel for the muscle** and a **mouth sensing benefit to the brain and central nervous system**. Guidelines for carbohydrate intake during different sporting activities vary according to the importance of these effects.
- There **may be other roles** for carbohydrate support during prolonged strenuous exercise that are of benefit to **athlete health**, particularly for high performance athletes. These roles are based on studies that investigate the acute response to exercise; further work is needed to determine if these actions translate into a reduced risk of illness and injury
 - Consuming carbohydrate before, during and/or after prolonged intensive exercise may help to protect immune function by being associated with a reduction in the detrimental changes in cytokines and immune system cells normally induced by exercise stress (Peake et al. 2017).
 - Such intake may also be beneficial to bone health by reducing the effect of exercise with low carbohydrate availability on markers of bone resorption (Sale et al. 2015).
- Many gels also contain **electrolytes**, particularly sodium, to assist with thirst drive and fluid retention, or to contribute to sodium balance during ultra-endurance events (see Electrolyte replacement fact sheet)

What does it look like?

- A sachet of a typical sports gel provides:
 - 20-30 g carbohydrate
 - ~350-500 kJ (80-120 kcal)
- While sodium content is typically low (< 100 mg per gel), some brands contain higher amounts (up to 300 mg)
- Some gels contain caffeine (25-100 mg) which can be useful as part of an overall performance nutrition plan (see Caffeine fact sheet).
- The type and quantity of carbohydrates provided in gels varies according to the brand.
 - Some newer gels contain “multiple transportable carbohydrates” — a blend of carbohydrates such as glucose and fructose which are absorbed from the intestine via different transporter molecules (see below)
- Gels are substantially more concentrated in carbohydrate than sports drinks to provide a large fuel boost in a single serve. They should be consumed with water or other dilute fluids, which can separately address hydration needs for the activity and reduce the net carbohydrate concentration to reduce risk of gut upsets.
- Despite recommendations in early sports nutrition guidelines against consuming concentrated forms of carbohydrate during exercise, recent studies have shown that sports gels consumed with water during moderate intensity exercise provide a similar pattern of carbohydrate delivery and oxidation by the muscle as sports drinks and are well tolerated by most athletes (Pfeiffer et al., 2009; 2010).
- Although each gel provides ~ 20–30 g of carbohydrate, decanting into custom made flasks allows the gel to be consumed in more variable volumes. In some sports, a gel can also be added to a drink bottle of water during the event to create a more dilute “sports drink”.
- The consistency of sports gels is likely to increase the amount of time and mouth contact associated with the intake of carbohydrate compared with sports drinks. This may increase the ability of gels to provide a performance benefit via the stimulatory effect of carbohydrate-sensing mouth receptors on the brain and central nervous system

How and when do I use it?

- **Use before exercise:** sports gels provide a low fibre and compact carbohydrate source for pre-event fuelling for athletes who are unable to tolerate regular foods and fluids
- **Use after exercise:** Can contribute to refuelling goals but other foods/sports products should be considered to allow a more nutrient-dense approach to total recovery needs.
- **Use during exercise:** to supply carbohydrate to the muscle and central nervous system
 - Fuelling: supplies easily consumed carbohydrates to provide an additional fuel source for the muscle according to the requirements of each sporting activity. Performance benefits have been clearly demonstrated in a range of sporting events as a result of this strategy (Phillips et al. 2011; Stellingwerff and Cox 2014). See Table 1 for recommendations.
 - Mouth sensing: the exposure of receptors in the mouth/oral cavity to carbohydrate creates a favourable response in the brain and central nervous system (CNS), decreasing the perception of effort and pacing strategies (Burke and Maughan 2015).

Table 1: Guidelines for carbohydrate intake during sporting activities (taken from Burke et al. 2010)

Type of sport/ Exercise	Duration	Carbohydrate Target	Comments
Brief exercise	<45 min	Not needed	
Sustained high intensity exercise	45-75 min	Small amounts including mouth rinse (swilling in mouth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of drinks, gels and sports products can provide easily consumed carbohydrate. • The main benefit from carbohydrate use in these events comes from interaction with the brain and CNS. To achieve optimal benefit, the athlete may need to organise their event nutrition strategy to allow frequent “mouth sensing” with a significant duration of mouth contact (e.g. 10 s).
Endurance exercise including “stop and start” sports	1-2.5 h	30 – 60 g/h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to consume foods and drinks vary according to the rules and nature of each sport. • A range of everyday dietary choices and specialised sports products ranging from liquid to solid may be useful. • The athlete should practice to find a refuelling plan that suits individual goals including hydration needs and gut comfort. • The benefits of carbohydrate intake strategies in these events are likely to be achieved both in the muscle (fuel)
Ultra-endurance events	>2.5-3 h	Up to 90 g/h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above • Higher intakes of carbohydrate are associated with better performance. • Products providing multiple transportable carbohydrates (glucose: fructose mixtures) will achieve high rates of oxidation of carbohydrate consumed during exercise. • The benefits of carbohydrate intake in these events are likely to be achieved both in the muscle (fuel) and CNS (perception of effort).

- Exercise delivery of carbohydrate consumed during exercise to the muscle is largely influenced by the rate at which it can be absorbed in the small intestine. Typically, ingesting glucose based carbohydrates (e.g. sucrose, glucose polymers, maltodextrin) at rates in excess of ~ 60 g/h during exercise does not lead to additional performance benefits. In fact, because intestinal glucose transporters (called SGLT1) are saturated at this level, excessive carbohydrate intake can cause gut discomfort/problems that impair performance.
 - **The gut can be ‘trained’** by consuming carbohydrates during exercise to maximise the number and activity of the SGLT1 transporters, thus enhancing glucose uptake and reducing gut symptoms (Costa et al. 2017; Miall et al. 2018).
 - In addition, some newer sports foods contain ‘multiple transportable carbohydrates’ - a blend of carbohydrates such as glucose and fructose which are absorbed via different transporter molecules in the intestine to overcome the usual bottleneck on a single transport system.
 - Studies have shown that when carbohydrates are consumed at high rates (> 60 g/h) during exercise to meet new guidelines for prolonged strenuous events, drinks containing multiple transportable carbohydrates are more effective than glucose-based products in maintaining gut comfort, promoting muscle carbohydrate oxidation and enhancing performance (see Jeukendrup 2010).

Are there any concerns or considerations?

1. Unnecessary expense

- Sports Gels are not needed at every training session and may be an unnecessary expense.

2. Unnecessary energy intake

- Athletes need to consider their physique goals and total nutritional goals when deciding whether to consume sports gels. In the case of athletes who have short- or long-term restrictions on dietary energy intake, overuse of energy-dense sports foods such as sports gels may create problems with energy balance and overall nutrient density of the diet.

3. Dental erosion

- Repeated exposure of the teeth to sticky forms of carbohydrate is not ideal for dental health. To help reduce the potential impact of sports gels on dental health, athletes should consider the follow options when they are practical or able to be balanced with the sports nutrition plan.
 - Minimise the contact time between the teeth and the sports gel and rinse out the mouth with water once the gel has been consumed
 - Where practical, consume dairy products immediate after the session, or chew sugar free gum immediately after consumption of the sports gel.
 - Avoid brushing teeth for at least 30 minutes after consuming sports gels to allow tooth enamel to re-harden (Needleman et al. 2018).

4. Gut discomfort

- Athletes should practice the use of gels and assess tolerance during training sessions if they are intended for use during competition. Research in laboratories and in the field has shown that the use of sports gels is well tolerated by most athletes. However, a small number of athletes suffer from significant gastrointestinal issues and may need an individualised protocol (Pfeiffer et al., 2010; Pfeiffer et al., 2009). The following strategies can help to minimise problems.
 - Sports gels should be consumed with adequate fluid to meet hydration needs and to improve gastrointestinal tolerance.
 - ‘Gut training’ – deliberately consuming a gradually increasing volume and concentration of sports gels during workouts - can allow the gut to develop better capacity to absorb carbohydrate and feel comfortable.
 - The use of sports gels with multiple transportable carbohydrates may assist in maximising gastrointestinal comfort, particularly when carbohydrate is consumed at high rates of intake (> 60 g/h).
- Individuals with fructose malabsorption or FODMAP intolerance should be aware of the fructose content of sports gels containing multiple transportable carbohydrates.

5. Interference with opportunities for training adaptation

- Some athletes may periodise their carbohydrate intake to help support training adaptations. This may include the prescription of workouts in which there is “low carbohydrate availability” (i.e. the session is undertaken with low muscle glycogen stores and/or after an overnight fast). This strategy may increase some of the important adaptive responses to exercise. Therefore, on some occasions, an athlete may deliberately choose not to consume gels or other forms of carbohydrate during the first part of a session (Impey et al. 2018; Burke et al., 2019).

Where can I find more information?

Sports Dietitians Australia	https://www.sportsdietitians.com.au/factsheets/
Batch tested products list	https://www.informed-sport.com/ https://hasta.org.au/
Supplement safety information	https://www.asada.gov.au/substances/supplements-sport

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This fact sheet was prepared by the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) Sports Supplement Framework working team (www.sportaus.gov.au/ais/nutrition/supplements). This information is intended to help athletes, coaches and scientists make evidence-based decisions about their use of supplements and sports foods. Before engaging in supplement use, we recommend that each individual refer to the specific supplement policies of their sporting organisation, sports institute or parent body, and seek appropriate professional advice.

Athletes should be aware that the use of supplements has anti-doping implications. Athletes are reminded that they are responsible for all substances that enter their body under the 'strict liability' rules of the World Anti-Doping Code. All attempts are made to stay abreast of scientific knowledge around supplements and sports foods, and of WADA issues related to anti-doping. We recommended that all athletes consult the advice of ASADA regarding contamination issues related to supplements and sports foods. The ASADA Clean Sport mobile app is also a useful resource to help mitigate the risk of contamination. (<https://www.asada.gov.au/substances/supplements-sport>)

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