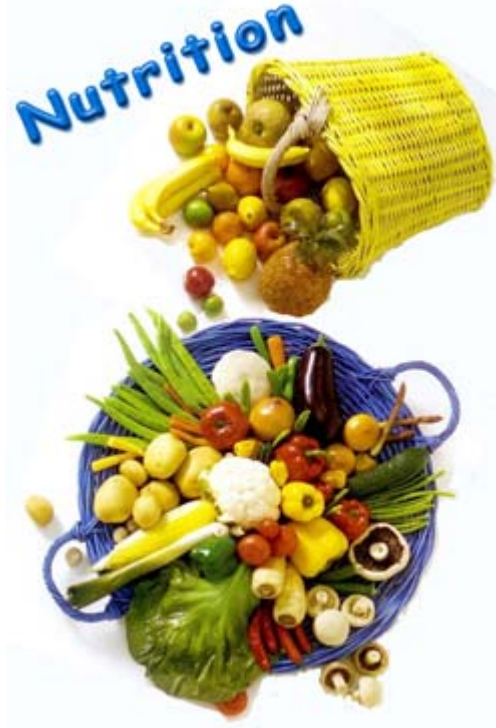


Weight Management for Ironman

Jennifer Hutchinson has some suggestions about managing your weight this season

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I don't know about you but I am looking forward to 2007. I'm finally coming out of my Ironman retirement (well more like a three year break) and am looking forward to a great season. Like many of you, I am logging many hours needed for a successful finish, but face the challenge of balancing it all and still eating well yup, even I have my moments.

Common sense tells us all that if we are training longer and harder our nutritional needs increase. We know that if we balance energy consumed with the energy we expend (calories in = calories burned) we will maintain our weight. So why is it that with all of this Ironman training a person does not loose weight? Or heaven forbid gain weight!

Failure to lose weight (i.e. body fat) or weight gain experienced during endurance training is one of the most common reasons triathletes seek nutritional coaching services. Here are some of my thoughts as to why triathletes may fall short of weight management goals for the 70.3 or full Ironman distances:

Calorie requirement misconceptions

I am surprised by how many triathletes overestimate how many calories they burn for a given day. Sure you need to be eating more of the right kind of foods during higher volume training phases, but this does not give you the license to eat larger quantity of food every day of the training week. Your energy intake, like your training, should vary during the course of the week.

This means when you have a heavy training day(s) you will need to eat more and when you have an active recovery day you will need to be eating less. Sounds simple enough, but unless you have a better understanding of your own energy needs, you may just keep beating yourself up saying “I eat very healthy but why can’t I loose the fat?” This is where the art and science of nutrition periodization is very helpful.

Tip: Make an appointment with a sports nutrition professional such as a Sports Dietitian and get your resting metabolic rate tested or body composition measured. These numbers can help estimate your daily nutritional needs. If you provide a detailed description of your training plan, you should also be able to get guidelines for your changing calorie needs ranging from rest days to your heaviest training day. This would be called a periodized nutritional plan.

Portion Distortion and Clueless about Calories

After a recent trip to Europe I understand why the US is the “Land of Plenty” ... our standard portions are huge! I am amazed at just how many people eat what’s put in front of them. They have no clue to the calorie impact that these types of foods and portions provide. Any athlete who is perplexed by their lack of progress is take a hard look at the amount of food and beverage that is really being put in their mouth and combine that with a little online research (for nutritional analysis). It will open a whole new world of awareness.

Tip: Break out the measuring cups, bowls and scale for a week. Right down everything you are eating ... everything! Use a free online nutritional analysis program such as www.fitday.com to see just how much you really are taking in.

Mindless Eating

An example of this is sitting in front of the TV or computer and munching on food or sipping on calorie rich beverages without being fully aware of how much you are consuming. This is the “Holy Mackerel I just ate an entire bag of (insert your blunder here)!” Calorie overload from mindless eating can be from less than healthful food sources, but even healthy foods can pack on the calories.

Tip: Pre-portion your foods and beverages before you eat. Avoid eating or drinking from the container the food items comes from unless it is labeled with the nutritional information. Write it down in a food log.

Empty Calories

This refers to those foods and beverages that supply energy (calories), but do not deliver much in the way of nutritional value (i.e. they lack sufficient vitamins and minerals). Foods include sodas, some energy drinks, candy, highly processed snack foods and alcoholic beverages.

Tip: If you are trying to drop weight you must avoid empty calories completely.

Calorie Density

This refers to a food or beverage that for a given volume or weight packs a significant amount of energy (calories). Calorie dense foods can be very nutritious (ex: nuts and seeds) but, if portion control is not in check, the excess calories accumulate very quickly. An illustration of calorie density can be seen when comparing 1 cup of fresh grapes (114 calories) compared to 1 cup of raisins (435 calories) compared to 1 cup of almonds (815 calories).

Tip: If you are trying to lose body fat you may want to closely watch the portions of many of the calorie/nutrient dense foods. Limit servings of nuts, seeds, dried fruit to one to two palm size servings per day.

Reward eating

I think many of us are guilty of this nutritional mistake at some point. Reward eating (or drinking) is when we justify having a less than healthful meal or eat larger portions to celebrate a successful training day. It can also be called *stress eating* when you justify certain foods because you had a really awful training day or a stressful week at work. It is very easy to stall weight loss attempts or tip the energy equation scale in favor of progressive weight gain if you are refueling with a cheese omelet, hash browns, stack of pancakes w/ syrup, large glass of OJ and bacon.....even after a four-plus hour bike ride! Get the picture?

It is very frustrating when an athlete sees friends and competitors getting leaner and lighter as the training season goes on and is left asking: "What I am doing wrong? Why aren't I losing weight? "

Nutrition science is not rocket science, but it does require awareness and some thought

especially if the you are not seeing the changes you would hope on your own. Hopefully the review of some of the common nutritional blunders will help keep you on a path to a successful Ironman season.

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