

Gain 5 Pounds, Run Better: Weight management for high school runners

By Jennifer Hughes

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As I flip through fitness magazines, there never seems to be a shortage of weight-loss articles. Each time I come across another "Lose five pounds in one month!" article, I grimace. Why am I being told to eat less when I run daily or sometimes twice a day?



For human garbage disposals yearning to gain weight, there's often little information available about how to approach this quest. For developing runners, it's especially important that they add weight in a healthy manner.

High school years are a time for growth spurts regardless of exercise. Increasing energy demands through running can make it difficult for student-athletes to keep up with calorie requirements, especially if they have the metabolism of a hummingbird.

"I wouldn't so much make eating more about gaining weight as about first meeting their energy needs," says registered dietitian Monique Ryan, author of *Sports Nutrition for Endurance Athletes*. "If they gain weight, that would tell me maybe they're building muscle because they are eating better, or storing more glycogen in their muscles because they are eating more carbohydrates and they have more fuel stored in their body, or they are better hydrated because they have a better hydration plan."

FIRST DRINK

When trying to gain weight, drinking enough is extremely important because there's a direct correlation between appetite and hydration. Digestion requires a dehydration process, so if runners don't drink enough water to sustain the dehydration, their appetite will drop, says Clyde Wilson, Ph.D., director of the Center for Nutrition at the Sports Medicine Institute in California. Gaining one pound requires eating 3,500 more calories than you burn, and this demands three-and-a-half liters of water in addition to the water you need throughout exercise, which is at least one liter for every hour of intensive training, says Wilson.

"If you're dehydrated, you won't be able to digest your food properly, and then you're going to have a low appetite and won't be able to keep up with your caloric intake," says Wilson. Consequently, a low appetite can lead to weight loss, which can lead to amenorrhea in girls, and decreased bone density, decreased enthusiasm for training, and poor performance in both genders.

"Without proper fluid intake, weight gain is never going to work," says Wilson.

THEN EAT

The second part of the weight-gain equation is, indeed, eating more. It's essential that high school runners eat more carbohydrates for training, healthy fats for increased energy, and protein for growth.

"Your body needs more of everything; you need to balance your macronutrients out and increase each of them," Wilson says.

Wilson stresses that runners trying to gain weight need to focus on caloric pacing, or spreading their calories throughout the entire day.

"If you gorge on three large meals a day, the rate of calories coming in the bloodstream far exceeds what lean tissue can absorb, which forces those calories to go to fat and be released in the bloodstream later on to be burned very slowly," says Wilson. Instead, if you pace your calorie intake throughout the day, then your lean tissue has time to absorb all of the nutrients. Some high school runners, who leave home early in the morning and don't return until just before dinner, must bring snacks to school with them to spread their calories throughout the day. High school coaches can make this easier by encouraging pre- and post-workout snacks--such as nuts, dried fruit, or chocolate milk--and providing a sports drink during practice, says Ryan.

Dave DeLong has been a high school cross country and track coach for 27 years, 25 of them at Canyon High School in San Fernando Valley, Calif., where his team has won two state championships and has finished in the top five multiple times.

DeLong recognizes weight is correlated to speed, and experience shows that weighing less means running more efficiently; however, weighing too little means not having enough horsepower to run faster.

"If they are not getting the proper nutrition or they have been thin for so long that it starts affecting injuries, their weight is counterproductive," says DeLong. "Drinking a lot of calories through protein drinks is a healthy and effective way to gain weight because recovery drinks replace all of the nutrients you need, and you're drinking a lot, which you need to do as a runner anyway."

Adding weight to naturally thin runners' frames isn't a shoo-in for increased performance, but Ryan, Wilson and DeLong agree that it can help prevent injuries and lead to better performance. Weight loss isn't easy, but weight gain can be just as difficult and important for some runners.