WINTER DIET = MAINTAINING WEIGHT, NEW STRENGTH, SETTING UP FOR HIGHER PEAKS

By Kenneth Lundgren

In the winter, cyclists train through colder conditions, ranging from 25-45 degrees, on average. It is widely reported that endurance athletes can burn through their carb stores much faster in winter months than in warmer temperatures. Through a process called thermogenesis, your body turns food into heat. And you need to fuel this furnace in order to maintain essential muscle and internal warmth – and perform well – while exercising in cold temperatures.

Rule of thumb: when we train in the cold, we typically need more fuel than the workout requires. This is why when you get to the coffee shop after your ride, the smell of carb-loaded food is so enticing! One main key is to replenish carbs before, during, and after you train… and if we need to eat more, the key is getting these extra calories from healthy sources that will help keep you trim and keep the immune system strong as the cold and flu season swings into full force.

If you’re having your pre-ride meal far before your ride, then you need to eat lower on the glycemic index. If you’re eating closer to the ride (less than one hour), then you should include foods higher on glycemic index. Either way, keep the pre-ride meal low in fiber, as this is very slow to digest and may just sit in your gut. Example of a solid lower glycemic pre-ride food is organic oatmeal… For higher-glycemic, try a banana and some OJ!

You also want to include amino acids in your pre-ride meal. Studies have shown that taking branched-chain amino acids before you work out can benefit your training performance. If we can add the protein, it will also lower the glycemic index of the carb you ate along with it. A lower GI subsequently means a longer and slower release of sugar into your bloodstream and muscles, which will delay the onset of fatigue.

Additionally, taking a mixture of essential amino acids with carbs will effectively stimulate protein synthesis after your workout… This is music to our ears as our recovery is just as important as the workout itself… The better we recover, the sooner we can hit it again. And as Friel writes in The Paleo Diet for Athletes, “The more quality workouts in a given period of training, the better your subsequent performances in races.”

I’ve found that you want to drink with your pre-ride meal, then hold off until the workout itself. This will help prevent you from still feeling full and bloated once you start. Hydrating adequately will help reduce protein breakdown during exercise, and we certainly don’t want to use our own muscles as fuel during exercise. Making sure you drink well during your pre-workout meal is a good way to ensure we don’t do this…

TIP: to boost warmth in the cold, drink beverages that include spices like cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg, which will stimulate digestive enzymes and help generate more heat after eating and during exercise!

Examples of a winter diet…

BREAKFAST, 2-3h prior to workout: Organic oatmeal with water, berries, and protein mix sprinkled throughout. Cranberry juice.

IMMEDIATE POST-RIDE MEAL: 2-3 hard-boiled eggs, banana, orange juice.
LUNCH: A bowl of vegetable stew with a side salad full of greens and veggies (avocado, tomato, sprouts).

DINNER: Grilled chicken with green beans. Water.

You should be snacking consistently throughout the day, never hungry, keeping your metabolism purring smoothly. The trick is to munch on low glycemic treats. For me, I’ve found that raspberries, nuts (all nuts but peanuts), carrots, celery sticks, apples, and salads prove to be the healthiest while also the most filling…

I know, no desserts or pleasant snacks included here! Well, here’s one: for some reason, we see more pumpkin pie in November and December than any other time of the year, and this is a shame! Pumpkins are packed with the powerful anti-oxidant beta-carotene. Experts say that the fat in the pie helps your body absorb the carotenoids (antioxidants that give pumpkin its color) and convert them to vitamin A…

Beta-carotene is the moisturizing nutrient, keeps our skin smooth and supple, and also promotes good vision. It also promotes the growth of healthy bones and teeth – and encourages our immune system to churn out the cells we need to fight off infections. Beta-carotene is an ideal winter nutrient to keep packed in your diet… Other than pumpkin pie ☺, beta-carotene is found in oatmeal, mangos, carrots, peas, pepper, liver (chicken, turkey, beef, calf, pork), milk, and eggs.

In the conclusion of this article, I write about the Paleo Diet… In the winter, it’s logical to eat foods that make you feel full with fewer calories, and these include veggies, fruits, lean meat, poultry, fish – and these are all staples of the Paleo Diet!

GETTING SICK?

Athletes who train in the cold suffer from an above-average number of upper-respiratory infections. One common answer is our immunity is lowered in the colder temperatures, which affects us all. We also breathe harder during exercise, which makes us susceptible to airborne bacteria and toxins. But riding the trainer can get mind-numbing and for many of the winter workouts on the menu, riding outdoors can be exponentially more productive than hitting the trainer. So here are a few things we can eat to ensure our immune system stays 100% strong:

Garlic. A 2003 study conducted by the University of California Irvine Medical Center shows that garlic juice has an antibacterial effect. Garlic also inhibits the growth of viruses as well…

Yogurt? Studies at the U of C at Davis found that yogurt provides a protective barrier against bacteria and makes the immune system stronger. People who ate a cup of yogurt daily for a year suffered 25% fewer colder than non-yogurt eaters. You’ll need to consume yogurts that “contain live and active cultures.” It’s also beneficial to start this yogurt regimen a month before the cold weather starts…

Cayenne helps make chilies hot, clears your head, nose, and respiratory tract. But it also has antiseptic and antimicrobial effects. Adding cayenne to your soups and other meals is the best way to consume it.

JUST CUT THE CRAP!

Now, in the winter we can typically experience the unwanted weight-gain. We’re not training as hard or as long, and we’re lifting weights… It’s very common to weigh more in the winter (in my opinion, a good thing) but we still need to make sure we’re only carrying around a few extra pounds and not unwanted pounds… The winter is a good time to set good habits for the rest of the season! Don’t think of a diet as a DIET. Think of it as part of the way you live, your lifestyle… Let’s strive for a new way of eating so it’s a seamless change in your life, not something that’s labored, something that’s a job… In truth, the cleaner you eat, the MORE you can eat!

Think about some of the “crap” you ingest during the day…

Most of my friends drink soda. That can be 250 calories a day. If you eliminated soda from your diet, that would be over 1500 calories a week – which is almost a 1/2 pound per week!

Starbucks Coffee. CALORIE CENTRAL more like it! Coffee drinkers are usually addicts. What starts as one becomes two in the morning, then several more cups throughout the day. I am against steady caffeine intake for several reasons (listed in an
article on its own!), but that’s not why I’m against including regular coffee breaks in the day. Coffee itself is not so filling, but then we add milk, sugar, cream, sweeteners, honey, whipped cream, chocolate – which can easily be 700 calories in a drink! If you want to get serious about your diet, cut out the crap. Plain coffee, maybe espresso, low-calorie cappuccinos are immensely better substitutes…

Along with coffee, most of my friends also consume alcohol recreationally… Chris Carmichael writes in his book, 5 Essentials for a Winning Life, that seven useless calories lurk in every gram or alcohol. This is about 98 in each shot of vodka or whiskey. Cocktails have more calories because of the added sugar. And beer has yeast… And along with caffeine, alcohol is a diuretic, which will contribute to dehydration on a hard training day. The common hangover is largely due to dehydration, and we all know how this horrible state can hamper the day’s training and cripple the rest of the week’s progress… I should also note that having alcohol in your blood during cold training rides may contribute to hypothermia… I’m not saying avoid alcohol altogether, but you need to be sensible…

One fat you absolutely need to avoid are trans fats, which are artificial fats used to increase the shelf life of processed foods. The body cannot process these fats and the fats stored in the body – more like in your arteries! Trans fat increases LDL cholesterol level while also lowering the healthy HDL cholesterol… This will inevitably lead to plaque building up on your artery walls, constricting and stiffening them… Trans Fats need to be avoided. 100%.

High-fructose corn syrup, another term that makes me cringe! These are sweeteners used in endless products – anything from baked goods to healthy breads – and are essentially empty calories. When you’re working out (and perhaps in post-ride workout), it’s okay to eat this “crap,” but other than that it should be avoided. I highly recommend you check the food labels to avoid this corn syrup! When you eat salad dressing, cereals, pasta sauces, juices, etc, look for foods that have no added sugar…

HAPPY HOLIDAYS?

Many of us succumb to overeating during the holidays. The food is there, the mood is upbeat, so why not indulge and enjoy the day? However, we can still eat and enjoy and feel guilt-free. As with any other goal, we need to PLAN for this…

You know you’re going to a big Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner… Make sure you have a healthy meal at home beforehand. Ideally, you ride the morning of, have a filling post-ride meal, and then scoot off… If you’re going to a dinner, offer to bring healthy snacks like celery and dip, etc. This can be a terrific pre-meal snack – and also less filling while keeping the calories away!

As we all well know, it takes 30+ minutes for our stomachs to tell us we’re full… So, if you’re at an all-you-can-eat event, you just have to be patient… Have your first meal… and then STOP!!! Eat just enough. Give it time, see how you feel – don’t eat two extra drumsticks because you still feel hungry… Eat smart, wait, listen to your body…

Let’s say you break the rules, gorge on a huge meal… Typically, many athletes will then starve, try to lose the weight immediately. DON’T DO IT. By doing this, you’re only grinding your metabolism to a halt, and your body, not knowing when it’s going to get its next meal, will hold onto every calorie, not willing to burn anything up… The next morning, start up with plenty of smaller meals, 6-8, always nibbling and snacking… This will help keep your metabolism humming along, burning more calories while in a sedentary state…

Also, why eat? When people think of holiday parties, it’s the dinner table. If it’s a corporate bash, why a dinner? Maybe a foray in ice skating, a hike, maybe indoor tennis or SOMETHING. And then a brief meal/snack/dessert after…

The bottom line is don’t obsess and take away the festive mood of these times, but try to live smart. This way, you can genuinely enjoy the holidays!

WINTER IS THE TIME TO TRY NEW THINGS…

Typically, in the winter our training time and training stress is reduced. Hence, our energy demands are less. So I decided to try the Paleo Diet, for several reasons. One reason, I was hit by a motorcycle in the spring and cracked my knee, am looking to fuel the body as best possible to help the bone heal. Second reason, it’s a healthier diet than my old stock “cycling” diet…
I have been researching the Paleo Diet for awhile now, and I was startled when I learned that two of the most successful athletes I coach both rigorously follow this diet... I've slowly been whittling out the cereals, pastas, beans, cheeses, all daily products from my kitchen and restocking it with more meats, fish, salads, fruits, veggies, soups, nuts...

I read Friel's *The Paleo Diet for Athletes* and scoured plenty of research by Dr. Ben Balzer... Dr. Balzer writes, "There are races of people who are all slim, who are stronger and faster than us. They all have straight teeth and perfect eyesight. Arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, stroke, depression, schizophrenia and cancer are absolute rarities for them. These people are the last 84 tribes of hunter-gatherers in the world. They share a secret that is over 2 million years old. Their secret is their diet, a diet that has changed little from that of the first humans 2 million years ago, and their predecessors up to 7 million years ago. Theirs is the diet that man evolved on, the diet that is coded for in our genes. It has some major differences to the diet of 'civilization.' You are in for a few big surprises."

One of the main goals in the Paleo diet is to avoid foods that are mainly carbohydrate... Balzer writes, "Antinutrients have an incredible range of biological effects. As you have probably already guessed, the vast majority and highest levels of antinutrients are in Neolithic foods like grains, beans and potatoes. The Paleolithic diet has incredibly low levels of antinutrients compared to the usual modern diet. I believe that this is the number one advantage of the diet."

Now, for the endurance athlete, carbs cannot be avoided altogether. Friel writes if you live a cleaner life and adhere to this diet, it is easier for your body to recover and restore its glycogen levels... He writes that most athletes can get their glycogen supply from fruit alone! Still, he mentions that it's good to eat carbs before you workout, during, and immediately after...

During this time of the year, I've been lifting weights twice per week, riding the PowerCranks 3 times per week... This alone can at first give you that FLAT feeling, but the diet isn't helping... Friel writes you'll feel very tired at first, getting over the sugar kick and detoxing the body, but within a month you'll feel recharged... So right now the energy levels are low... but the workouts themselves have been going very well... I’ve been PowerCranking steadily, and the gym workouts have been progressing... So far, so good...

Before my workouts (especially the harder ones), I've been avoiding my cereal and instead having orange juice, a few eggs, and bananas. I try to eat 90 minutes before I work out, no closer than an hour... Here you want the carbs and reduce the amount of fiber you eat. You also want to eat protein. Friel writes of the benefits of eating branched-chain amino acids before your workout and how it benefits your performance...

During the workouts, I eat my trusty Clif Bars and drink my high-glycemic drinks. Always eat, always hydrate when you're working out. Always. ALWAYS.

And then after you're done, you want to eat immediately. You want to eat high-glycemic foods that can be easily broken down and absorbed into the blood and muscles... Glucose, which is in potatoes, rice, and grains, is a great source for quick recovery. Fructose, in fruits and juices, is also a good option, just isn't as fast to absorb... This meal is best taken in liquid form, as it's absorbed more quickly and begins the rehydration process...

Also, you want to get some protein in there. Friel writes that with a hard 1-hour workout, you can use 30 grams of muscle protein for fuel! So we need to take in foods that are rich in branched-chain amino acids. And simply, the best source is egg.

And then the later meal(s), which most athletes usually screw up, should relate more to the Paleo Diet: no foods high in carbs, no sugar, no salt, no dairy, no grains, nothing processed... Athletes are probably concerned about filling their glycogen levels, but Friel writes that the more we can live with this diet, the better and more efficient we get at restocking this lost glycogen. If we eat more fruits and vegetables, it takes a less concentrated effort to rebuild the level. In fact, it's more maintaining, not rebuilding. Low glycemic fruits and veggies can accomplish this while also providing micronutrients necessary for recovery...

And that's that. I'm going to stick with it, see how it works out... I figure with a bum knee, really cleansing the diet may be a good thing. AND if you're going to try a new diet, you may as well do it as FAR away from your goal event and peaks as possible. So now's the time! I look forward to seeing how I feel and how I perform on the bicycle... Now my friends, my girlfriend, they may have a hard time! I can already see a Saturday night at the restaurant!

"And sir, what would you like?"
"Do you have a plain bowl of tuna? And I'll take a glass of water to go with it." 😊

In my opinion, the winter is the most important time of the year. It is during Foundation training where you’re setting up your peaks for later in the year, setting how high you’ll be able to reach when it’s time to start going full-metal. And dieting correctly, fueling your body 100% correctly, will allow you to reach that much higher. By training smart in the winter, you’re setting yourself up for a top spring and summer campaign. If you are manic about your training, about the watts, about the intervals, you need to be equally diligent about what you’re putting into your body.

Thanks for reading.

Kenneth Lundgren.

Works Cited


Kenneth Lundgren is a professional cycling coach and bike fit specialist for Elite Endurance Training Systems, a coaching service that offers training programs for cyclists and triathletes of all levels.

Ken also races for the Northeastern Hardware Cycling Team and is one of the area’s top time trialists, finishing 2nd for consecutive years in the New Jersey Time Trial Cup. Northeastern Hardware is one of New England’s strongest elite squads, competing in many of the area’s Pro/1/2 events. The team has won the Garden State Cup for six consecutive years and looks to make it seven straight in 2009.

Ken can be reached at (201) 951-4732 or Coach@EliteEndurance.com.

“Discover your potential – be ELITE.”