

BACKPACKING FOOD ON LONGER TRIPS

The food you'll be using to fuel your body during long hikes is not like the food you usually eat at home. Most of us try to limit calories at home. On the trail, you want to maximize calories and nutrition so you can keep on hiking day after day. This overview will help explain why some foods are better than others.

- ✓ How much is enough – backpacking long distances is hard work. Some experts recommend that males need about 4,000 calories/day and females about 3,500 to keep hiking. Using the calorie and nutrition content data on food packages, you can estimate how much energy you'll get from the food you carry. A good guideline is to plan on 2 pounds (net) of food per person each day. That is 2 pounds of the right food. Keep reading to see how to pick the right food. Also note that as a long (over one week) trip goes on, your body will need more food each day than when you started. So, plan to increase portion sizes as the trip progresses.
- ✓ The "fuel food" – carbohydrates are the easiest and quickest foods to digest. They should make up 50 to 70% of your daily calorie intake. Complex carbs are longer lasting and much better than simple carbs (grains rather than refined sugar). Breakfast should have lots of carbs from whole grains. Lunch and the morning and afternoon snacks should provide carbs that will re-fuel your body during the day.
- ✓ The highest calories per gram – fats provide the highest calories per gram of the food you'll carry. Fats are digested slower than carbs, therefore, they do a better job of providing energy throughout the day than the quick acting carbs. Nuts and peanut butter are excellent foods to carry. They are high in good fats (omega 3) and high in calories per gram. Walnuts have the highest calories per gram of almost any food. Plan to get 15 to 25% of daily calories from fats. Be sure to minimize saturated fats.
- ✓ Rebuilding those tired muscles – protein is needed to help rebuild muscle tissue while you rest. You'll also need some protein while you're exercising. Plan on getting 15 to 25% of daily calories from protein. Emphasize protein in the evening foods. Some special sports drinks are also available. They are specifically designed to help with muscle recovery and re-building. We like "*Recoverite*" from *Hammer Nutrition*.
- ✓ Biggest bang for the buck – Let's use calories per gram (C/G) as our measure of the energy in the food we'll carry. Using C/G together with the nutrition data on the food labels will allow us to pick foods and menus that provide the most energy and nutrition for the weight we'll have to carry. For example, we used to carry *Quaker 5 Minute* cook oatmeal for breakfast. It requires a pot, 5 minutes of cooking (extra fuel!), bowls to eat out of, and messy cleanup. Loaded with raisins, brown sugar, and milk, it yields 3.6 C/G. Now we use Costco granola, dry milk, and walnuts. It uses cold water, is eaten out of the baggie it's packed in, and yields 4.5 C/G. We get more energy from breakfast, reduce prep time, don't have to cook the food, save on fuel weight, and avoid messy cleanup. The Costco granola breakfast provides a good balance of carbs, fats, and protein. Remember, when you set up overall menus, you'll need a good balance of C/G and the carbs, fats, and protein we need.
- ✓ Lighten Your Load – a lighter pack is a more comfortable pack. Backpacking food should be easy to prepare and eat. I recommend using foods that don't require cooking in a pot. Cooking takes time, requires cleanup, and uses a lot more fuel (FUEL IS HEAVY!). For a one

week backpack, food will be the single heaviest thing you carry (14 lbs at the start). So, it's worth the time and effort to pick the best foods. Use entrees that can be re-hydrated in the pouch that they are packed in (so you can leave your heavy bowl at home). We usually use some hot water for drinks at breakfast, and boiling water at dinner for freeze dried entrees. All of our other breakfast, lunch, snack, and dessert foods use cold water. No cooking, cleanup or fuel required. Easy and much lighter!

- ✓ Backpackers are athletes – hiking is serious exercise. Like other athletes, hikers have a huge array of special energy, hydration, and electrolyte products to choose from. Just look at all the energy bars and other items sold by *REI*. Since hikers will be exercising all day, we need products that are designed to provide longer term benefits. We've found some excellent choices from *Hammer Nutrition* (www.hammmernutrition.com). Remember that electrolyte replacement is very important. Try electrolyte products well before your trip.
- ✓ Some important info is missing! – the data on your food packages provide lots of good information on C/G and nutrition. But those data don't tell you how a particular item tastes. If it tastes bad, chances are you won't eat it! Some of the foods, especially the freeze dried entrees and desserts, won't appeal to everyone. To help with the question of taste, here are some results from our "taste test" trips:
 1. Breakfast – we like Costco "Natures Path" granola (2 flavors). At home, put the granola in a baggie with dry milk and walnuts (very high C/G). *Mountain House* has a granola with blueberries that is good too but it costs a lot more. The egg dishes from most vendors are tasty every few days, have good C/G, but are high in salt.
 2. Lunch – peanut butter (very high C/G) & jelly (carried in squeeze tubes) on water crackers is excellent for mid day energy. Bagels and similar bread products have a really low C/G - the water crackers are much more efficient. Salami and beef stick are tasty but high in salt and saturated fat. Once every three days for these seems reasonable. Tuna mix in individual packets is tasty but has very low C/G. Leave those home.
 3. Snacks – *Kirkland* brand trail mix has good nutrition as an energy snack and tastes good too. Put each day's portion in individual baggies so you're sure you're eating each day's ration. Cashews or other nuts make a very nice treat. We usually eat a *Hammer Energy Bar* or *Kate's Food Bar* each day later in the afternoon.
 4. Dinners – freeze-dried entrees make great dinners. They are compact, come in many different flavors, use boiling water, and are eaten out of their package (no bowl to clean!). Some of the entrees are high in salt. Bring little containers of spices and add salami, garlic, freeze dried cheese, or other things you like to perk up your dinner!
 5. Dessert – most of the freeze dried desserts are OK as an occasional treat. The *KIND "Protein Bar"* is tasty, has pretty high protein (12 grams), and comes in 3 flavors. Just think of it – no guilt desserts that you can eat whenever you want!
 6. Supplements – Freeze dried food is not a good source of vitamins and minerals (especially potassium). For that reason, we now use multi vitamin/mineral supplements on longer trips.

Happy trails (and tasty meals)!

Tom