

# The Travelling Athlete

*Text: Nicki de Villiers, Registered Dietitian, hpc*

Athletes often engage in travelling to various destinations for purposes of acclimatisation, training and competing. Athletes may experience fatigue during travelling and when arriving at their destination. The weather, climatic conditions, ambient temperature and pressure and cultural variables at their destination might all affect athletes. Local customs regarding diet and nutritional practices, quality and quantity of food available and the standards of hygiene could contribute to various challenges experienced by travelling athletes.

Travel fatigue is related to the duration of the trip, the elapsed time since rising from the last full night's sleep and discomfort experienced during prolonged periods of travelling. Fatigue is further compounded by disturbances of circadian rhythms when travelling across multiple time zones. Travelling athletes are further prone to an increased risk for illness (particularly food- and water-borne illness), jet lag and environmental stress. Prevention is always better than cure and athletes should prepare in advance to identify possible problems at the destination and institute strategies for prevention.

## GETTING READY FOR TAKE-OFF .....

Determine all aspects of the upcoming trip, e.g. including travel arrangements, accommodations, competition times and venues. Based on all these aspects, athletes should use a diary to plan and document possible meal and snack times around travel, training and competition.

### PRE-TRAVEL CHECKLIST

- Vaccinations (where necessary)
- Itinerary, including modes of transport, traveling times and likely breaks in the journey, e.g. meal stops, refuelling stops and overnight stopovers
- Training and competition schedule
- Type of accommodation and meal arrangements
- Trip coordinator's details
- Familiarity with place of destination (e.g. climate, time zones and food and drink availability)
- Local customs (e.g. clothing, language and dietary habits)
- Baggage limits, including equipment
- Food, fluids and supplements to be taken

## TRAVELLING LOCALLY

- Staying in self-catering accommodation can provide greater flexibility in food choices and preparation. Consider portable foods to carry or purchase as well as cooking utensils that can be carried with.
- When on the road, plan for portable snacks.
- When using trains or busses, check the availability and protocols for food on route and/or the frequency of food stops.
- When travelling to training camps or competitions that last several days, organize menus in advance.



## SUITABLE TRAVELLING SNACKS

- Fruit (if travelling locally) or canned/dried fruit
- Nuts
- Rice crackers or pretzels
- Popcorn
- Muesli and cereal bars or breakfast bars
- Dry cereal in individual serving boxes
- Low-fat fruit yoghurt
- Sandwiches, fruit bread, low-fat muffins
- Canned fish
- Jelly sweets (in moderation)
- Low-fat plain or flavoured milk
- Water, fruit juice, sports drinks, liquid meal supplements



## TRAVELLING OVERSEAS

- If travelling to destinations with a high risk of traveller's diarrhoea; take probiotic supplements or consume yoghurt that contains live probiotic cultures
- Book special meals from airlines prior to travelling, if needed
- If travelling to destinations with unfamiliar foods, athletes should opt to travel with food staples or plan to send these options to their destination prior to travelling. Athletes can pack liquid meal supplements, dried milk powder, breakfast cereals, cereal and sports bars, as cleared with customs regulations.
- Athletes could familiarize themselves with food options and dietary customs of their destination prior to departing.
- Athletes should consider travelling with supplements (multivitamins/minerals and probiotics), electrolyte-replacement sachets and antibacterial wipes.

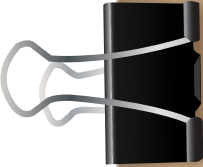




## PREVENTION OF JET LAG

Jet lag occurs due to the disturbance of the body's circadian rhythms, including diurnal and performance rhythms. Methods of attenuating the symptoms of jet lag can include pharmacological and behavioural approaches (e.g. manipulation of nutrition and activity).

## TIPS TO DEAL WITH JET LAG

- 
- Adapt meal and snack times to destination time one to two days prior to departure and during the flight.
  - High-carbohydrate, low-protein meals during transit may help induce drowsiness.
  - Travel with a water bottle and sip continuously to ensure replacement of fluid losses due to dry environments associated with an increased pressure in the cabin.
  - Avoid, or be moderate with, the intake of alcoholic beverages, as the effects of alcohol are exacerbated in the plane environment.
  - Consider avoidance of caffeine containing drinks when it causes wakefulness and sleep prevention.
  - Pre-arrange meals that fulfil in individual dietary goals supplying high carbohydrate content and low fat options.
  - Pack portable, high-carbohydrate snacks in hand luggage.
  - Keep a food diary as reminder of food intake and meal times.
  - Travel with activities, e.g. books, games and music, to prevent boredom eating.
  - Adopt regular meal and snack patterns upon arrival and pay attention to optimal hydration practices.

## PREVENTING FOOD- OR WATER-BORNED ILLNESS

Pay attention to personal hygiene, avoid foods that are high-risk for contamination and adopt hygienic food handling and storage practices. High-risk foods include uncooked fresh foods such as meat, fish, vegetables and eggs; unpasteurized dairy products or reheated foods.

- Frequent hand washes with soap, especially prior to eating. Dry hands with a clean towel or air dryer.
- If the local water at the destination is unsafe, boil all drinking water or make use of bottled water.
- Avoid ice in drinks, unless the water is safe consumption.
- Avoid eating salad or raw vegetables unless the food has been washed in safe water.
- Peel all fruit.
- Avoid other raw foods such as oysters, shellfish and raw fish (sushi).
- Avoid buying foods from local food stalls and street markets with questionable hygiene.
- Avoid buffet food that is not served very hot or chilled or that have been offered for extended periods of time.
- In countries where food hygiene is questionable, select foods that have been cooked to order rather than pre-cooked and heated.



## STRATEGIES FOR TREATING DIARRHOEA AND VOMITING

When suffering from diarrhoea and vomiting, pay attention to replace fluids and electrolytes. Appropriate food choices (low-fat, low-fiber foods) can be gradually introduced as tolerated.

### Nausea and Vomiting

- Withhold food in the short term, but pay attention to maintain fluid intake.
- Consume small, frequent meals such as dry crackers, toast.

### Diarrhoea

- Maintain a high fluid intake through the consumption of bottled water and electrolyte replacement drink or sports drink. Avoid milk, caffeine drinks, soft drinks and fruit juice.
- In the acute phase, avoid very high-fiber foods and spicy foods.
- Avoid fatty foods and high sugar foods.
- Introduce small amounts of low-fiber foods initially with gradual increase in fiber intake as tolerated.
- Consider taking probiotics to reduce the incidence of diarrhoea and help restore natural gut bacteria.



## MEETING DIETARY GOALS

Travelling often places athletes a risk of failing to meet their specific nutrition goals. The change in environment such as exposure to altitude or a different climate may alter an athlete's nutritional needs and goals. Environmental stress can decrease the initial training intensity resulting in decreased energy expenditure in athletes. The new environment may also provide reduced access to food and food preparation facilities, resulting in the reliance on food from hotels, restaurants and takeaway outlets, rather than being tailored to the need of athletes. A new food culture and different, unfamiliar foods can pose a challenge to fussy eaters. Different hygiene standards may expose athletes to the risk of gastro-intestinal diseases. The excitement and distractions typical accompanying travelling may cause athletes to lose focus and eating environments, such as buffets and athlete dining halls may pose several food temptations to novice travellers.

- Search for information regarding the usual foods and food culture of the new destination.
- Ask athletes that previously travelled to the destination regarding the challenges experiences.
- Do regular weight and/or skinfold check to prevent substantial body composition changes. Inappropriate food choices at sporting venues, buffet-style eating in restaurants and unfamiliar foods often favours weight gain.
- Monitoring morning body weight and urine colour and volume to keep track of hydration status.
- Consider keeping a daily food diary to maintain focus regarding eating and dietary behaviour.
- On return, debrief regarding difficulties with food availability and accessibility at various venues and destinations. Also evaluate diet-related issues and efficacy of strategies applied.

### References:

- Burke L, Deakin V. *Clinical Sports Nutrition*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. McGraw Hill: New York, 2011
- Waterhouse J, Burke L, Alonso JM. *Nutrition for travel*. *J Sport Sci*. 2007; December.