

## Post-Contest Dieting and Recovery

You did it - you **competed in a bodybuilding competition**, and regardless of how you placed according to the judges, you should be extremely proud of your accomplishments. In fact, you may already be looking forward to another upcoming competition and wondering what you can do to best prepare.



At the same time, you're probably feeling hungry, emotional, and thoroughly worn down after stepping off the stage, particularly if this was your very first body building competition. In reality, bodybuilding competitions are **always extremely exhausting for the competitors**, even if experienced professionals are accustomed to this type of exhaustion.

Fortunately, it's possible to quickly recover from your pre-contest preparations and the rigors of the competition itself by incorporating some basic post-contest concepts into your **diet, exercise, supplementation and rest** routines. The post-contest stage of bodybuilding is all about **recovery, replenishment, and rewarding yourself** for the extremely hard work you've been putting in over the last several months or even years.

### **Binge Eating After a Bodybuilding Competition**

In the immediate aftermath of a bodybuilding competition, your body will be quite literally **exhausted**. You'll be dehydrated, your blood sugar will be at a minimum, your electrolytes will be depleted, and you'll be extremely fatigued, both mentally and physically, from the intense preparations you underwent during your pre-contest diet. You'll also be extremely exhausted from the competition itself, which will require you to constantly flex your muscles onstage as you go through the various posing routines.

In order to reward themselves and replenish their energy levels, most bodybuilders engage in at least some form of **binge eating** immediately after the completion of the evening show. After weeks of stringent dieting, rigorous physical training and extreme levels of willpower, this is understandable. In fact, it will probably be your first opportunity to **actually feel full** after weeks of dieting and staying hungry.

### **Binge, But Binge Smartly**

Binging is actually quite necessary after a bodybuilding competition since your nutrient levels will be extremely low. However, this doesn't give you a license to eat whatever you want, in whatever quantities you want, for as long as you want, particularly if your goal is to quickly get back into bodybuilding shape

in preparation of another competition or even the bodybuilding off-season. By binging incorrectly, you could **cancel out months of hard work and seriously interfere with your metabolism**, subsequently setting yourself up for a lot of extra work down the road.

Ideally, you'll want to binge on **protein and vegetables** after completing your bodybuilding competition. This is the best way of replenishing most of what was lost to your pre-contest diet. However, the condition of your body may cause you to crave simple carbohydrates, junk food, candy and other **empty-calorie foods** that will give you a quick sense of fullness but a lack of nutrition.

By all means, it's acceptable to **eat whatever you want in the 24-hour period following a competition**. If this means eating cheeseburgers, pork sandwiches, shrimp alfredo, donuts, fries and ice cream, so be it - you earned it. However, it would be very unwise to allow your binging to go on for more than a day, or especially for more than two days.

### **Binging, Endorphins and Insulin**

If your binging goes on for too long, it will cause a **shift in your brain chemistry** and your brain will produce an excessive amount of endorphins, the "feel-good" chemicals that are also released following a session of intense exercise. This can quickly lead to the very-real sensation of being addicted to junk food, particularly since your body is already in a highly vulnerable physical state not unlike **starvation**.

Excessive binge eating will also have an effect on your levels of **insulin**, the powerful hormone responsible for regulating blood sugar levels. Immediately after the competition, your insulin levels will already be extremely low due to the rigors you've just put your body through. The hungrier you become, the lower your insulin levels will fall, and the more likely you'll be to crave junk food. This is your body's way of saying "**give me energy quickly - I'm starving.**"

By binging to excess, especially when binging on **carbohydrates**, your insulin levels will sharply rise, which in turn causes your pancreas to produce even more insulin. In this case, your **metabolism will become slower and slower**. Insulin will then attach to your cells, sucking unwanted items such as fat and sugar into the cells in addition to the necessary protein. This will result in excess body fat that's extremely difficult to lose, particularly as you age.

### **How to Binge Without Spoiling Your Bodybuilding Efforts**

The following are some specific tips to follow to ensure that you binge in a way that helps your body recover and prepare for a return to growth and gains in muscle mass, strength, density and definition:

- Drink plenty of **water**. Much of your pre-contest prep involved depleting water levels, and now it's time to rehydrate. The more water you drink, the less likely you'll be to crave junk food, since thirst is sometimes mistaken for hunger. Drinking lots of water will also cause you to retain less water, reducing bloating.
- Maintain a **reasonable caloric intake**. This holds especially true after your first day of binging, when you should be transitioning to your off-season eating habits.
- Eat whatever you want for **24 hours** in order to reward yourself, but don't allow binging to go on for days. This is where the discipline you learned during your bodybuilding program will come in handy.
- As a rule of thumb, initially return to how you were eating approximately **four weeks** before the competition date. This will help you to transition back to a somewhat higher-calorie diet.
- Focus on eating **plenty of protein**.
- Eat between **six and eight smaller meals** each day.
- Avoid gaining more than **20 pounds** over your competition weight if you're a male, and **10 pounds** if you're a female. Ideally, you'll want to minimize post-contest weight gain as much as possible.
- Do **something you enjoy** to take your mind off of junk food cravings. Visit a friend, see a movie, go shopping - whatever gives you comfort and temporarily takes your attention away from bodybuilding.
- Stay away from **alcohol** while you're binging, as it will dehydrate you even further. Alcohol also has an extremely high glycemic index, meaning that your body turns it into glucose very quickly, messing with your metabolism in the process.

### Getting Your Diet Back Into a Growth Routine

The aforementioned tips will allow you to **smoothly transition into the bodybuilding off-season**, when your goal is to maximize your levels of muscular mass, density and strength without gaining too much excess weight. Once your binging period is over, you'll still need to pay careful attention to your diet in order to ensure that the foods you consume support your bodybuilding goals.



As your daily caloric consumption increases after the competition, you'll naturally consume more **sodium** each day. This will cause your body to retain more water, particularly in light of the fact that your sodium levels were so low in the week leading up to and including the competition. If you consume too much sodium too quickly, your body will be shocked and respond by retaining even more water, at least until it becomes accustomed to a regular sodium intake.

Once it makes this adjustment, your water retention levels will return to normal. In the meantime, however, raising your sodium intake too quickly may cause you to retain up to **five or even eight pounds** of water weight, especially if your overall weight gain is high.

Aside from these considerations, your goal should be to get back into the habit of eating **whole, natural foods that are of the earth** while avoiding packaged, processed foods that often count as empty calories. Focus on eating **complete proteins, complex carbohydrates and unsaturated fats**, particularly fats that include plenty of essential fatty acids (EFAs). Minimize your intake of saturated fats and simple carbohydrates. Eat several smaller meals throughout the day and ensure that you're getting an appropriate level of fiber, as both of these considerations will help you to feel full and minimize cravings for junk food.

An extensive overview of the types of foods you should be consuming for making steady bodybuilding progress can be found in our [Dietary Requirements](#) section.

### **Physical Exercise After a Bodybuilding Contest**

Exercise and training will probably be the last things on your mind when you're exhausted immediately following a bodybuilding competition. However, as your energy and nutrient levels return to normal along with your diet, you'll want get back into a physical exercise routine that includes both **strength training and cardio**.

### **Cardio**

In terms of **cardio**, it's usually best to perform **at least 50% of the cardiovascular exercise you were doing in your pre-contest prep**. If you were doing cardio for 80 minutes per day in order to lose weight and enhance muscle definition before the contest, start by doing 40 minutes a day after the contest. Engaging in regular cardio will help to keep your metabolism up, ensure that your body is properly utilizing the nutrients you feed it, and **prevent excessive post-contest weight gain**.

This is also a great opportunity to **explore new forms of cardiovascular exercise**. If you prepared for your last bodybuilding competition by using indoor stairclimber and elliptical machines during the winter, for example, now might be a good time to select activities that match with the current season, such as

swimming, rowing and cycling. The first benefit of changing up your cardio routine is that it will **accelerate your bodybuilding progress** by forcing your body to quickly adapt to new challenges, working your cardiovascular system and the muscle groups that support the specific exercise in ways they may not have been worked before.

The other major advantage of modifying your cardio routine at this point is **motivation**. There may be some bad memories associated with the types of cardio you were performing in order to prepare for your last contest, and you may find it depressing to hop right back on the treadmill after spending two hours a day on it during your pre-contest weight loss efforts. Choosing a different form of cardio will keep things fresh and exciting and reduce your chance of **bodybuilding burnout**. Consider a team sport as a supplemental activity, as social interaction is a great way to beat post-contest boredom.

### **Strength Training**

In terms of **strength training**, you may be too exhausted to perform an intense strength training workout the day or even a few days after your bodybuilding competition. This is natural due to the exhaustion that culminates with the competition itself. In fact, you may decide to only perform cardio for the first week after the competition, though many bodybuilders return to strength training sooner.



This decision will depend on your ability to listen to your body and determine when you're ready to transition to a bodybuilding program focused on **gains in muscle mass, strength and density**. If you know that you'd like to compete in another bodybuilding competition in the future, you'll obviously want to return with an even more developed physique than you had your first time competing.

During your pre-contest preparations, you cycled some **explosive exercises** out of your weight training routine in order to make room for additional **rhythmic exercises**. The goal of this was to maximize your muscle definition and have you peaking just in time for the contest. When it comes time to bulk up again, increasing muscle definition will be a secondary goal to increasing muscular mass, density and strength. For this reason, it's important to shift your focus back to explosive exercises while still retaining some rhythmic exercises in your routine.

This means performing sets that include a **large amount of weight and a relatively smaller number of repetitions**. This will appropriately stimulate your muscles and get them back into a growth routine.

Gradually increase the frequency of your strength training sessions so that you return to your regular off-season habits approximately **two weeks after your competition**.

### **Supplement Considerations**

In the final week leading up to your bodybuilding competition, you may have used **diuretic supplements** to help deplete any remaining water from your body, increasing the apparent definition of your muscles in the process. It's important to **discontinue using these supplements** once the competition has ended, as one of your primary goals now is to compensate for your body's lack of hydration. Remember that taking diuretics to an extreme extent can be very dangerous, so use caution even when integrating them into your pre-contest diet.

If you typically use a **whey protein supplement** to expedite your bodybuilding progress, there's no reason not to continue using it after a bodybuilding contest. After all, your muscles will require massive amounts of protein in order to return to (and eventually exceed) the levels of mass, strength and density they contained before you began your pre-contest preparations. However, be aware that some whey protein supplements contain a relatively high amount of **sodium**. As mentioned previously, consuming too much sodium too quickly after a bodybuilding competition can contribute to water retention and bloating. For this reason, it's important to carefully read the labels of any supplements you consume in order to confirm their sodium content.

Another supplement that you should consider taking immediately after a bodybuilding competition is **fish oil**. Fish oil contains high levels of **essential fatty acids** (EFAs), which are known to assist in stabilizing blood sugar levels. **Evening primrose oil** is another supplement that contains large amounts of EFAs, and may appeal to those who have a distaste for fish oil supplements.

Taking a **multivitamin and mineral supplement** after a bodybuilding competition may be a good idea as well. After following a highly limited nutritional diet for weeks before the bodybuilding event, taking a well-rounded multivitamin will help to replenish your levels of several different important vitamins and minerals.

### **Rest Considerations**

For obvious reasons, rest and sleep will be **extremely important** after the conclusion of your bodybuilding contest. In fact, you'll probably be so exhausted that the first thing you'll do after eating a large meal will be to sleep, likely for several hours beyond the eight you strive to receive each night.

It's important to **clear your schedule** for the first few days after a bodybuilding contest in order to allow yourself to catch up on rest. Returning your body to its optimal levels of functioning will require you to not only replenish your body with food and appropriate supplements, but with sleep as well.

Both the body and brain engage in restorative processes while you sleep, and alleviating your exhaustion after a bodybuilding competition will be of crucial importance to both your **physical and mental health**. If you fail to catch up on rest now, you run the risk of suffering **burnout** and losing the motivation to continue your bodybuilding career.



As is evident, taking the appropriate **post-competition actions** is just as important to the overall integrity of your bodybuilding career as preparing for the competition itself. Remember that the competitive event does not represent the end of the journey, but rather just one milestone that will come and go as your career continues.

By **restoring key nutrients, vitamins and minerals, avoiding prolonged binging, using the appropriate supplements, catching up on sleep, and gradually getting back into a physical growth routine**, you'll maximize your chances of staying healthy and put yourself in the best possible position to approach the next bodybuilding competition on your schedule with an even higher level of intensity.