

Nutrition & Hydration for AFL Umpires

The footy season is a demanding time for the umpires.

So, what are the nutrition needs of umpires and if you're an umpire, what should you eat?

Nutrition and performance

Let's begin by looking at why there is an increasing focus on what umpires should eat.

From research into athletes' performance, we clearly understand that poor nutrition and hydration has a clear and direct impact on your physical performance. Importantly for umpires, it also has a direct impact on our psychological performance and ability to concentrate.

Poor nutrition leads to:

- Decreased coordination
- Poor decision making
- Decreased speed and endurance
- Delayed reaction time
- Headache, stomach upset, increased heart rate

All the above are crucial for optimal umpiring performance. Umpires require coordination for quick movements, centre bounces, throw-ins; clear decision making every minute of the game; and the ability to adjust speed to keep pace with the game.

Therefore, what should umpires eat and drink to achieve clear and accurate decision making, along with prolonged speed and endurance?

The challenge for umpires

There are unique nutrition challenges for umpires and these challenges differ from field, to boundary, to goal umpires. One challenge that all umpires share is access to fluid and fuel.

During game time, whilst they can access drinks from the team trainers, this access is not predictable and can be a challenge at times. Therefore, umpires need to target their quarter and half time breaks to optimise their performance.

So what are their individual challenges?

FIELD UMPIRES – the managers and decision makers

Field umpires need to cover large distances, often at high speed, to make accurate decisions and manage the game. In order to do this, consistent energy levels are required, avoiding drop offs in energy levels which often lead to distraction and delayed reaction time.

BOUNDARY UMPIRES – endurance and speed

Boundary umpires need a combination of endurance to run for the whole game, along with speed to keep up with fast movements of play. Along the way, clear and accurate decisions also need to be made. Therefore, the focus for the boundary umpire is regular fluid intake and consistent carbohydrate intake.

GOAL UMPIRES – explosive movement and clear vision

Whilst the adjudication of set shots on goal seem fairly straight forward, next time you are at a game, take a moment to imagine yourself in the goals for a quick snap on goal, kick off the ground, or fast bending ball. For the life of a goal umpire, explosive movement and excellent vision are key tools, both of which require good nutritional intake.

What should I eat?

This is a great question as there are three phases to elite umpiring performance – preparation, performance, and recovery. Let's take a look at what you should be aiming to eat at each of these times.

PREPARATION

Preparation encompasses what you eat and drink on a day-to-day basis, along with what you eat on the day of the game.

Quality carbohydrate

Carbohydrate is the key fuel for your working muscles. It is also vital for optimal brain function and therefore concentration and clear decision-making.

Your day-to-day diet should be based around quality carbohydrates (including dairy products, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals), lean proteins (meat, chicken, seafood, legumes, lentils), and unsaturated fats (nuts, seeds, avocado, seafood). Spread your intake out over three meals with a bridging snack/s in between.

On the day of the game, carbohydrate is still your key fuel but you may benefit from choosing lower fibre options i.e. white bread instead of wholegrain etc. This is to ensure you avoid a stomach upset. Great [pre-game](#) meals 3-4 hours prior to the game include cereal with milk, a pasta meal with a tomato sauce, sandwich / wrap, or yoghurt and fruit. Your choice depends on the time of day and your personal preferences.

Once at the ground, a small snack to top up your fuel stores should be consumed. Great choices at this time are high carbohydrate foods that don't sit in your stomach for too long. Such foods include Sustagen Sport, Gatorade, a banana, or white bread with honey. It is important to tailor your choice to tried and tested foods.

CARBOHYDRATE



Hydrate

Hydration should not be neglected, again to ensure optimal concentration levels. You should be [drinking enough fluid](#) to pass pale yellow urine several times per day. This should be a focus each and every day, not just on game day.

PERFORMANCE

Your goal should be to consume ~300ml of fluid and 30g of carbohydrates per quarter – 30g at ¼ time, ½ time and ¾ time. What does this mean? Well 30g of carbohydrates is equivalent to one of the following: 1 banana, ~1 energy gel, 500ml Gatorade, or 10 jellybeans.

Boundary and field umpires generally focus on consuming Gatorade and water for their [hydration](#), and energy gels for their carbohydrate needs. A banana may be consumed at half time, but most umpires focus on [energy gels](#) which sit comfortably in the stomach and provide instant energy.

For goal umpires who don't have the endurance running aspect to their performance, achieving stable energy levels whilst keeping hunger at bay is the main focus. Therefore, foods which combine carbohydrate for energy and brain function with protein for preventing hunger are the best choices. Common choices include an energy bar, a sandwich, flavoured milk, piece of fruit, and nuts. A meal 2-3 hours prior to the game is also beneficial.

RECOVERY

It is vital to commence your [recovery](#) as soon as possible after the final siren.

This enables your body to start the recovery process in readiness for the next training session and game.

Be prepared and bring food and fluids to the ground.

Your focus should be on carbohydrate to replenish your energy stores, protein to heal muscles, and fluid to rehydrate.

At AFL level, the post-game recovery meal includes a Gatorade, flavoured milk, piece of fruit, some lollies, and a sandwich or pizza.

In summary, umpires like other athletes, require targeted nutritional intake. Without appropriate fuel, physical and psychological performance will be compromised. So next time you are umpiring, stop and consider how you fuel your muscles and your brain!

Source: <https://www.sportsdietitians.com.au/sda-blog/nutrition-afl-umpires/>