

## **Food and Drink on the Trail - the Musher**

Everyone always wants to know what we eat out on the trail. The quick answer (for dogs and humans) is lots of protein, lots of fat, and lots of variety.

The dogs need about 12,000 calories per day when racing. I don't know that they've ever measured a musher's caloric need, but I do know that eating well out on the trail is really important for keeping up energy and mental focus. In my rookie race I was shocked by the intensity of my hunger, something I never encountered in the shorter 200 or 300 mile races. My body was so insistent on being fed that I could barely think or function until I had taken care of my hunger. I would wake up out of a dead sleep and need to rush to get food into me. Now I plan ahead more and make sure I always have a little something on hand for those intense bouts. Musher's are known to lose 20 or more pounds in the week and a half of the race because of the incredible toll on the body, but also because eating is such a challenge.

First, extreme fatigue often causes nausea. Even when you are desperately hungry it can be hard to choke food down. You never know what will sound good at any given time, and food that was delicious at the previous checkpoint may seem absolutely impossible at the next. I send out a wide variety of different foods to each checkpoint, all of them delicious, tempting foods that I love. It sounds weird, but spicy foods are often the most appealing when your stomach is turning due to exhaustion. I load each meal with as much flavor, fat, protein, and calories as possible.

This year I couldn't get enough of home-made macaroni and cheese. I think it was the buttery crumbs on top that really got me going. Teriyaki chicken and rice, and thick cheesy, bacony, potato soup were also high on the list. For some odd reason, the barbecue beef that was my top favorite last year was inedible this year. You never know what will go down, so having several options at each meal can make a world of difference.

Another challenge to getting good nutrition is that every bite of food is frozen solid. During breaks I can thaw out a meal in the boiling water in my cooker. Big bulky items like burritos or steaks just don't work, so every meal must be prepackaged already cut up into bite sized pieces, packed into vacuum seal bags, and flattened out thin so it will quickly thaw in a hot water bath.

Sometimes during long runs it can be 12 or more hours between actual meals, so snacking along the trail is also vitally important. I try to eat a little something every two hours, just like my dogs. And any other time I feel a twinge of hunger I take an extra dip into my bag of trail snacks. Trail snacks have to be small pieces that can be eaten while frozen. My snack bags are filled with a huge variety of goodies all designed to be packed full of flavor and tempting, but also easy to eat while frozen. For each leg of the race I shipped out a ziplock full of trail mix, beef jerky, cheese sticks, cookies, gummy fruits, peanut butter or cheese crackers, and mini candy bars (all unwrapped ahead of time so I don't have to fumble with them or take my gloves off out on the trail).

One thing I've learned - caffeine, carbohydrates, or anything that gives short high is also followed by a crash. This effect is amplified by fatigue, exertion, and severe conditions. So I try to avoid these things when I am racing. But sometimes I figure, if I just keep eating cookies, the crash will never come. Right?

Whenever I snack, I also make sure to drink. Keeping liquids actually liquid is another challenge. I have a two quart water-cooler-type jug padded with extra insulation and connected to a piece of insulated tubing that makes a long straw. Filled with hot water, my giant “sippy cup” keeps things from freezing up for many hours, even at temperatures well below zero.



And I don't even need to get it out of the sled bag to get a drink – just lean over and grab the straw as we go on down the trail. Being able to sip almost constantly is a real advantage to staying hydrated. I send out lemonade powder and other drink mixes to add in. It is surprising how good hot lemonade is on a cold day, and it does a good job covering up the flavor of any swampy tasting water. Many of the checkpoints have hot water available for the mushers' thermoses, but the quality can really vary!

So there's your summary of how to eat like a musher. Let me know if you have any questions!