

Raising The Bar

Raising the BAR Energy bars and drinks are multiplying and becoming more complex. But knowing what to look for can help you find the right products to fit your fitness needs. Browse through any bike store, running store or health food store and the variety of energy products can overwhelm you. Even your run-of-the-mill grocery stores will sometimes stock enough bars and drinks to make your head spin. How are you supposed to wade through all the hyperbole to find the products that really will help your performance?

While it's easier said than done - and often requires a bit of experimenting - you can start by narrowing down how you expect to use the product. Once you figure that out, the choices become easier to comprehend and more subjective questions of taste and texture become important. Are you a fruit person or a chocolate person? Do you like something smooth or chunky? After all, if you don't like the taste, you probably won't eat it.

Most products that are referred to as "energy bars" actually fill a variety of niches. While we offer a number of suggestions for each niche, keep in mind that these are only the tip of the iceberg. Try out a couple of different bars to see if they work for you (always during training - never before a race, where you need to be dealing with known quantities).

Performance Bars

This is where the category really got started. It's a lot easier to pop a couple of PowerBars in your bike jersey than carry peanut-butter sandwiches (although some purists certainly continue to enjoy their squished bread).

These bars really are designed to help provide energy, or at least provide fuel for your body to use during exercise. They tend to be high in carbohydrates, which are easy to burn. They're easy to digest, usually not too messy (who wants sticky fingers on a long run?) and often have other vitamins and minerals that athletes can use. Some may have caffeine or other ingredients designed to serve as performance boosters.

Generally, your stomach determines when you can eat these. Since they're easy to digest, some people can chomp down a Clif Bar 15 minutes before a run and be fine. Those with more sensitive dispositions may want to eat an hour or two before exercise and stick to drinks closer to the workout.

During long workouts, particularly cycling, these bars can give you needed calories. And while liquid recovery products may be engineered more specifically for after-sport, these will at least help you replenish your carbohydrate stores.

PowerBar:

The bar that started it all is still the industry leader. They're easy to find, easy to digest and easy to love, especially when they're warmed to the right temperature by sitting in your bike jersey for a couple hours. What's to like? Cookies and Cream becomes its 11th flavor. www.powerbar.com

Clif Bar:

Clif Bar has grown rapidly the last several years, particularly among cyclists and climbers. They're known for their great taste and softer consistency. Clif also offers the Luna Bar for women. What's to like? The ice series, particularly the cool mint chocolate bar, has the zip of added caffeine and a taste that rivals dessert. www.clifbar.com

Gatorade Energy Bar:

From the leader in the sports drink category comes the Gatorade Energy Bar, in four flavors – chocolate, peanut butter, peanut butter chocolate chip and oatmeal raisin. What's to like? The bars are made from crisp rice and whole-grain rolled oats (think a healthy Rice Krispies treat). www.gatorade.com

Boulder Bar:

These oven-baked bars use natural fruit juices, figs and brown rice syrup for sources of simple sugar, instead of high fructose corn syrup or refined sugar. This gives them a much fruitier taste than most other bars. What's to like? They're also free of wheat, dairy and animal products, for those looking to avoid them. www.boulderbar.com

Adding More Balance

Some nutritionists contend that the best ratio of calories to consume is 40% carbohydrates, 30% protein and 30% fat. (More traditional bars usually have 70% carbs.) These bars give you that exact ratio, which makes life easier than trying to balance the snacks you eat to conform to those guidelines. Even if you're not following the 40-30-30 plan, these bars are still a healthy snack alternative, and many people like the taste.

Balance Bar:

These popular bars have reached a broad base of consumers looking for a healthy snack alternative in a variety of flavors. Balance Outdoor bars are available without a coating, so you don't have to worry about them melting when you take them outside. What's to like? Balance Gold Bar offers three layers of chocolate, caramel and nuts, giving it a candy-bar feel. www.balance.com

Phil's Bar:

Dr. Phil Maffetone, one of the leading proponents of the 40-30-30 plan, offers his own bars that follow the program. What's to like? While this Dr. Phil may not be on Oprah, he still has quite a following, particularly among serious triathletes. www.philsbar.com

PureFit:

This bar uses no dairy products, no animal products and no added sugar. What's to like? It tastes good, especially the peanut crunch. www.purefit.net

Looking for a Snack

These are healthy bars designed to be a good snack alternative. They are usually pretty high in carbs and low in fat, but the emphasis here is on the overall health content of the bar. Be sure to check the label, as some have more fat than you may want. (They also may have more calories.) These bars often include added vitamins and minerals, and they emphasize taste. A good choice if you're looking for something to get you through the afternoon without hitting the vending machines. Some suggestions:

Odwalla Bar:

Seven energy bars from a juice manufacturer, they have the look and taste of a granola bar. They're high in carbohydrates and all-natural ingredients – and offer a few interesting flavors like carrot and Cranberry C Monster (with 250% of your RDA of vitamin C). What's to like? All natural ingredients and tons of antioxidants. www.odwalla.com

Clif Bar's Mojo:

Clif Bar gets a little spicy with their new Mojo Bars, which combine salty snack flavors with a nutritional product. They avoid the sweetness of most bars in favor of flavors like Spicy Salsa Peanut

and Curry Cashew. What's to like? Besides the name, how about a hot alternative in snacking? Keep that water bottle filled. www.clifbar.com

PowerBar Pria, Harvest Bars:

The other big hitter in the category has two choices for snackers. The Harvest Bar has a granola-like texture, while the Pria is wrapped in chocolate or yogurt. What's to like? Pria tastes like a candy bar with only 110 calories. www.powerbar.com

High-Protein Bars

Protein is necessary for building and maintaining muscles, and new research shows that consuming protein immediately after exercise can help in muscle recovery. Most people who consume high protein bars are looking to bulk up, which is one of the reasons the bars are usually so large. But an increasing number of folks are eating half a bar after a workout for recovery. Some of the more popular high-protein bars include:

Promax Bar:

The Promax Bar from SportPharma features 20 grams of protein and is packed with additional vitamins and minerals. What's to like? Choose from eight flavors, but we especially liked the wildberry cheesecake. www.sportpharma.com

PowerBar Protein Plus:

PowerBar's entry into the protein category. What's to like? About three times as thick as a regular PowerBar, it features 24 grams of protein and 100% of the RDA of 10 essential vitamins. www.powerbar.com

Eating to Get What You're Missing

While all bars offer some kind of nutritional supplements, this category exists to help people get specific dietary needs. The most popular category now is soy protein, and a good example is the Zoe Flax and Soy Bar, which is a natural source of flaxseed and soy protein (www.zoefoods.com). Health food stores are crammed with other bars that feature practically any other protein, vitamin or mineral that you may need in your diet.

Eating for Recovery

Finally, while most of the recovery products are in drink form (see below), you will find several bars that fill this category. Much research has been done in the last several years to promote proper nutrition in helping to aid in muscle recovery. One of the top products - and one that deserves its own category - is Jogmate. It comes in a tube and has the consistency of pudding, but it isn't sweet. It's designed to be eaten within 30 minutes of exercising to help reduce fatigue and muscle soreness. For more information, visit www.jogmate.com

Drinking It All In

While dehydration in severe forms can cause serious health problems, even small levels of dehydration can lead to a decrease in performance. So, while we all know to keep drinking during exercise, the question becomes WHAT to drink.

The rule of thumb used to be that, for any exercise under an hour, water is fine. But more athletes are discovering the benefits of fluid replacement drinks and recovery drinks both during and after exercise. Using a sports drink becomes especially important for endurance athletes, who need the

sodium and other minerals in the drink that allow you to absorb water effectively. Once again, the choices are vast. But it's at least divided into simpler categories: fluid replacement and recovery. There is some overlap (it couldn't be that easy), but it's still a useful distinction.

Fluid replacement drinks are designed to get you the water, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals that you lose during exercise. Recovery drinks are designed to be consumed after exercise to stop muscle soreness and fatigue.

Be sure to try any drink before a race situation. In fact, it's not a bad idea to find out what drink will be handed out during a big race, so you can get used to it in training. Some of the top choices for athletes include:

Gatorade:

The inventor of the category and by far the largest player, Gatorade continues to pump money into research and devise new products. What's to like? In addition to the science, Gatorade has more flavors than you can ever remember, giving you a lot of choices to find something you like. www.gatorade.com

Propel:

The newest Gatorade product is called fitness water, which means it's water with a little added flavor, vitamins and antioxidants. What's to like? If you don't want all the calories of a sports drink but like more flavor than just water, this fits the bill. www.gatorade.com

GU20:

From the makers of GU energy gel, GU20 is a fluid replacement drink, pure and simple. It doesn't try to be anything else, and it's a tasty choice with slow-burning carbs, potassium and sodium. What's to like? The two flavors, lemon lime and raspberry, are both top notch. www.gusports.com

Extran:

This Dutch drink has fast become a staple in the Tour de France and other cycling events over the last couple of years. It's now available in the U.S., and getting rave reviews from cyclists and other endurance athletes. What's to like? Easy mixing, easy digestion and a quick energy boost make this a great import to savor. www.extranusa.com

Cytomax:

A favorite among serious athletes, Cytomax is formulated for both fluid replacement and recovery. What's to like? The advanced carbohydrates for the body, the tangy orange for the palate. www.cytosport.com

Accelerade:

From the makers of the successful Endurox R4 recovery drink, this fluid replacement drink uses the same science to help with quick glycogen replacement. What's to like? It's a little thicker than most drinks, but the taste is fine. Great source of rapid and sustained energy. www.endurox.com

The Edge:

New from supplement manufacturer Scitrex, The Edge is targeted at endurance athletes for sustained energy. What's to like? Nice clean flavor with no aftertaste. www.scitrex.com

Ultima Replenisher:

A popular drink that sponsors a lot of major races, it features no simple sugars and 70 minerals. What's to like? It was a winner with both passion and wildberry flavors. www.ultimareplenisher.com

G-Push:

This line of drinks offers four different formulas -hydration, endurance, momentum and recovery, each with a different percentage of carbohydrates. They also use galactose, a common but little used natural sugar, which helps avoid the sugar crash that comes with some sports drinks. What's to like? If you ever have trouble keeping your blood sugar balanced, G-Push is definitely worth a try. Its endurance drink (G3) is also a big plus for those long-distance runners, cyclists and triathletes looking for more than just a hydration beverage. The citrus-flavored drink goes down easy. www.gpush.com

On the Recovery Side:

Endurox R4:

This drink was created after research determined that a 4:1 ratio of carbohydrate to protein helps speed muscle glycogen replenishment and rebuild muscle protein. What's to like? Waking up the next day after even the toughest workout without sore muscles. Lots of anecdotal evidence backs the research, and lots of endurance athletes chug a bottle after a race or workout. www.endurox.com

GNC Pro Performance Distance:

Long name, fine drink. It's designed to replenish glycogen and protein stores after exercise. What's to like? The fruit punch flavor was good, and so were the results. www.gncproperformance.com