



How a Plant-Based Diet Can Benefit Endurance Athletes' Heart Health, Performance, and Recovery

By Karen Asp, MA, CPT, VLCE
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From Olympic skater Meagan Duhamel to ultramarathoner Scott Jurek, numerous athletes have demonstrated that you don't need to eat meat to compete. Now a [new review](#) published in the journal *Nutrients* supports what these athletes already know: A plant-based diet not only meets athletes' nutritional needs but also gives endurance athletes an edge when it comes to heart health, as well as performance and recovery.

The report, titled "Plant-Based Diets for Cardiovascular Safety and Performance in Endurance Sports," comes on the heels of studies that have found that endurance athletes have a higher-than-average risk for diseases of the heart, including atherosclerosis and myocardial damage. According to [one study](#) cited in the review, 44 percent of middle-aged and older endurance runners and cyclists had coronary plaques, which can increase heart disease risk.

However, a plant-based diet can offset these risk factors. "A low-fat, vegetarian diet is the most effective dietary pattern clinically shown to reverse plaque," the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), which had several staff members serve as study co-authors, said in a statement. Atherosclerosis is also triggered by high blood pressure, diabetes and excess weight, all of which a plant-based diet addresses.

Meanwhile, endurance athletes on a plant-based diet often have lower body fat, which can give them a performance advantage. "Athletes with lower body fat increase their aerobic capacity, which is the ability to use oxygen to fuel exercise," says Susan Levin, MD, a board-certified specialist in sports dietetics and director of nutrition education for PCRM. "Studies show that athletes on a plant-based diet increase their VO₂ max—the maximum amount of oxygen they can use during intense exercise—leading to better endurance." And because carbohydrates are the main source of fuel during aerobic exercise, a plant-based diet, which is carbohydrate-rich, gives athletes the fuel they need.

The other bonus with a plant-based diet? Study authors note that eating plants increases blood flow and tissue

oxygenation while reducing oxidative stress and inflammation, all of which can aid athletes' performance and recovery.

Levin stresses that these findings have relevance not just for professional or Olympic-level athletes. "Everyday athletes experience the same boost from a plant-based diet as gold medal Olympians, Super Bowl winners, and Wimbledon champions," Levin says. "The performance and recovery benefits provided by the fiber, carbohydrates, antioxidants, and other nutrients found in a plant-based diet are the same whether you're running a 5K or marathon."

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.