

Raisins and Spinach: Strength Food for Runners

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Runners mark progress by minutes-per-mile, personal records, total miles per week, weight loss, heart rate, body mass, and a host of other measures. What is the one measure that every runner faces, regardless of ability? Loss of muscle mass. We all grow older with each passing day, and advancing age means loss of muscle mass, period. Exercise slows the process of losing muscle mass, but it is inevitable for every runner.

How and why does this occur? With age comes a slow but certain change in kidney function. This change results in a higher loss rate of **nitrogen**, a key ingredient of muscle protein. For runners in their 50s and older, the net loss is marked. No matter how much nitrogen older runners ingest, they will quite literally flush away more nitrogen than they eat every time they urinate. This net loss of nitrogen means an inability to form new muscle.

The change in kidney function also produces higher levels of acid in the blood, and conversely a lower alkalinity level in the blood. It is this acid-to-alkaline level that is the key to balancing nitrogen in the body. Higher blood alkaline levels means enhanced nitrogen balance in the body.

“You are what you eat” is particularly true when it comes to nitrogen and muscle loss. Certain foods are known to increase blood acid, while others boost blood alkaline levels. Eating foods that increase blood alkalinity, while cutting back on those that drive up blood acid, will help avoid the natural loss of muscle mass that accompanies aging.

So what are some of the “right” foods to eat? Raisins and spinach. Both have high negative rankings for alkaline levels, as opposed to foods that have high positive rankings for acidic levels. Here are some examples, along with their positive acidic rankings or negative alkaline rankings:

Acid foods (+)		Alkaline foods (-)	
Brown Rice	+12.5	Raisins	-21.0
Whole-wheat bread	+8.2	Spinach	-14.0
Parmesan cheese	+34.2	Bananas	-5.5
Spaghetti	+7.3	Celery	-5.2
Processed cheese	+28.7	Carrots	-4.9
Turkey	+9.9	Lettuce	-2.5
Chicken	+8.7		
Beef	+7.8		

This doesn't mean that runners (especially “veteran” runners who are approaching or are beyond the ages of 40-50) must avoid the acidic foods completely. But runners who carbo-load with spaghetti, meatballs, whole-wheat rolls and Parmesan cheese should certainly have some raisins and spinach to go along with the meal. Like all things in life, balance is the goal. Maintaining a balance of blood acid-alkaline levels is especially important for preserving muscle mass.