The new Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) is slated to go Army wide in October 2020. The creation of many different fitness test “rituals” are sure to come with it. There has already been a tremendous amount of discussion on how to best train for it. Proper nutrition may be the most important preparatory component in doing well in this new test. This article will discuss some of the most evidence-based nutrition recommendations for preparation, to include training, fueling, and recovering for the ACFT.

Training
Proper nutrition during ACFT training will be dependent upon the workouts being done. One nutrition priority for training is to ensure that you are eating enough carbohydrates (carbs) and protein to properly fuel and recover from workouts. Carbs are essential to building up energy stores. Protein helps to rebuild the muscle after a hard workout. Eating a light snack with carbs in it before a workout will assist in providing energy for long workouts. Anything from 15-20 grams of carbs will work as a light snack. This can be anything from a small banana to a small bag of cereal. After a long workout, make sure to have a well-balanced meal with protein and carbohydrates within at least four hours of that workout in order to recover properly. The USDA MyPlate model is a good visual of what a well-balanced meal should look like after a long workout. Protein shakes can be used afterwards as well to supplement those carb and protein needs. Do not try to use protein shakes to replace a meal after a long workout.

Before the test
Soldiers typically develop a pre-test nutrition “ritual” that brings them PT glory come time for the test. Ensure that you have regular meals and hydrate properly the day before this test. This will help to keep your energy levels steady throughout the test. This is going to be a long fitness test. Being properly hydrated and energized is key to perform well. Try to drink at least one bottle full (12-16 oz.) of water from the time you wake up until the time you begin the test. The morning of the test it will be important to have a quick-digesting carb snack that you know will sit well in your stomach. Some good examples of quick carb snacks include bananas, carb-full protein shakes, or applesauce.

During the ACFT
I will reiterate that this test is going to be long. Rough estimates from ACFT train-ups say that it could take as long as 90 minutes to complete. To eat or not to eat during the test? Research has suggested that one may benefit from consuming carbs if participating in continuous physical activity for 90 minutes or greater. However, practicing when and what to consume during the physical activity is also recommended because of the potential for getting sick during the test. Timing is important as well because if you eat your snack as the grader says “GO!” for your two-mile, it will just hurt you. To allow for a good amount of time for the carbs to be digested it would most likely be best to eat your snack somewhere in the middle of the test. Assuming that the ACFT does take 90 minutes to conduct, 45 minutes into the test may be the best hit time to eat that small snack. Either before the push-ups or the knee-tuck would be the best suggestion that I could give. When you are doing your train-ups for the ACFT, test out what works best for you.

Recovery
Properly fueling after the test is important because you want to be able to give your muscles the best environment to rebuild. During the test, you will be using energy stored in both your muscles and liver to power you through the finish line. An important priority after the test is to eat some carbs to restock those stores that you just broke down. Consuming protein after your workout will also be crucial to rebuild muscle and gain strength. Most notably, make sure to rehydrate! Try to drink at least a bottle of water more than what you sweated out. If your urine is not a light yellow, you have not drunk enough.

Supplements: Go or No-go?
It is common knowledge that supplement use is widespread throughout the Army. Justifiably, Soldiers use supplements that keep them awake and alert enough to complete their mission. Two of the most researched supplements in the area of performance are caffeine and creatine. Caffeine has been shown to assist improvement in fitness events by lessening fatigue and increasing alertness. Creatine supplementation has been deemed safe by the International Society of Sports Nutrition. It has also been shown to assist in improving power in weight lifting and lessen muscle loss during inactivity. This evidence points to using certain supplements to achieving a successful ACFT score. However, proper usage and understanding of supplements have always been a common hiccup for Soldiers. This has created the need for educational briefs that teach Soldiers about the risks of taking supplements. The supplement industry is not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This means that bottles of supplements are not required to have accurate food labels like most food products. The Human Performance Resource Center website and Operation Supplement Safety app are great databases that are no cost and can be used to look at safety statistics for particular supplements. Understand what you are putting into your body and how this will help you reach your ACFT goals before you decide to take a supplement.

Conclusion
Soldiers who have not taken their nutrition seriously may receive a rude awakening the first time they go through this test. Do yourself a favor and be proactive about your nutrition. Army Dietitians are the subject matter experts of nutrition for Soldiers. If you have questions on how to improve your nutrition, set up a nutrition consult at the Jennifer Moreno Clinic on Fort Sam Houston. It is free of charge and will show dividends during preparation and performance of the ACFT.

- Resources: Please see other side for article resources.
Your Guide to Fueling for the Army Combat Fitness Test

article resources: