

FIGHTING FIT

When there's big money on the line you need to make sure your body is in peak condition. Nutritionist **Drew Price** reveals the perfect preparation for a big poker tournament

So you've scored a place in your first major tournament. You've got your plane ticket, the stake is taken care of and you have three intense days of poker to look forward to. Nervous? You should be. This is going to be gaming like you've never experienced and you need to make sure you're ready! Obviously you know not to book a flight that arrives 10 minutes before the tournament starts, but how else can you make sure that you're good to go when the first hand is dealt?

Some might remember when Garry Kasparov and Nigel Short did battle over a chess board. These guys – goliaths of the chess world – were at the pinnacle of their game but Kasparov was unbeatable and Short knew it. He made sure his preparation was as good as it could be – he cut out everything

extraneous and totally focused; he ate the same things and had a whole wardrobe full of identical clothes. Basically he lived a bit like a monk trapped in the film *Groundhog Day*.

But what have you got in common with these tweed-wearing geeks? Everything! For the next three days you're a 'brain athlete' and need to be totally focused. While they're playing for intellectual reward, international glory and the pride of their country you may be playing for something much

more important – next month's rent!

So it's off down the high street for three weeks' worth of Chow Mein pot noodles then? Err, no. But there are some sensible changes to be made that, while not exciting, are going to do wonders to your performance while not driving you totally insane.



“Water is vital for maintaining concentration and longevity at the table”

HYDRATION

Sod the drought warnings – get some of nature's finest down yer neck

Water – it's useful stuff. After all, essentially your body isn't much more than a bunch of chemical reactions taking place in a skin-bag full of water. As far as you need to know for your poker play, water is absolutely vital for maintaining proper concentration and longevity at the table. Of course, it's a bit of a double-edged sword as too much water is going to lead to a few bathroom timeouts but it's a sacrifice worth making.

What should I drink?

Due to the sugar and/or caffeine content you should avoid most soft drinks, including sugar-free varieties, and energy drinks. 'No energy drinks?' I hear you cry. No. These should be avoided and only used as a last resort if you're really starting to lag. The vast majority of drinks you consume at, or away from the table, before and during a tournament should be just plain old water. Pretty boring, eh?

How much should I drink?

As a nutritionist I would say that for an average person with no health problems you should be drinking three litres of water a day, but more if you're exercising and/or in a hot part of the world. If you're taking this really seriously I'd suggest that you start cutting out your caffeine intake in the three weeks beforehand (this will help with hydration and mean you do actually get a boost when you need to use caffeine to help concentration). Start consuming up to three litres of water a day in the weeks leading up to the tournament to allow your bladder to get used to the volume. Sneakily, on game day, reduce the amount you drink by a just a glass or two so that you don't hit capacity and need to visit the bathroom too frequently. Nothing destroys concentration quite like a full bladder!



POKER POWER SHAKE

Here's a recipe you can use as a quick breakfast or snack for later on.

- 1 large cup of green tea
- 20g of whole rolled oats
- 1 banana
- 1/2 pint of skimmed milk
- 2 tsp of flax seed meal
- 2g Taurine
- 2g Tyrosine
- 20g of whey powder (optional)
- 2-4 cubes of ice



Simply mix all the ingredients in a blender and you're good to go. If you're in a rush, drink on the way to the tournament room. But if you have time make some in advance and take to the tournament for later. All the above ingredients can be found online at www.hollandandbarrett.com.

SLEEP

Because Maggie Thatcher had only four hours' kip a night and the country went to the dogs...

Sleep is one of those things, like water, that we all know is important but we take for granted. Unfortunately, performance dips fast if you don't get enough but I'm here to help you with that. Follow these general rules for a better night's sleep and improved concentration levels during the day.

How long?

People in the know recommend around eight to nine hours sleep per night but you need a minimum of six hours sleep to perform well over a long period of time, which includes a two- or three-day tournament. This sleep should be deep and uninterrupted – and preferably not preceded by a marathon stint down the pub.

A good night's sleep?

The sleep you get should be the same as you've had in the few weeks leading up to the event and continued right through the competition. Maintaining a similar level of sleep is important for the body to function at its best. In order

to get a good night's kip you have to leave sufficient time for the sleep and get to bed in a timely manner. You can't force yourself to go to sleep but there are ways to make it easier to drift off.

Pre-bed routine

You should develop a going-to-bed routine that you can use in the 30 or so minutes before hitting the hay. Do something each night in the lead up to the event that does not involve much thought or strenuous movement, with the aim of slowing down your mind and body, subconsciously programming yourself to know that it's soon time to sleep. So, at the same time each night, do something repetitive like folding and putting away the laundry. Adopt a similar routine when you're at the tournament and your mind will drop into a lovely pre-slumber readiness.



Sleeping supplements

Try not to resort to taking supplements but you may find the following useful – especially the night before it all kicks off. But make sure you try these out before you get to the tournament to gauge your reaction to them – you don't want any last-minute surprises!

■ Valerian root

This is nature's herbal sleeping pill. It gently aids restful sleep, helping you drift off easier. Take infrequently and for a maximum of three consecutive days. Go for a quality brand and use between 300-600mg of the dried herb. You can buy 60 Standardised Valerian Root Capsules (250mg) from www.gnc.co.uk for £6.29.

■ Magnesium

If valerian helps you drift off to sleep magnesium can help keep you asleep. It's a muscle relaxant that aids restful sleep by relaxing the whole body. For your purposes 300-400mg is more than enough. You can score 90 capsules of Potassium Magnesium Aspartate Vegicaps from www.discountvitaminsandherbs.com for £12.14.

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DIET

You'll only get out of your body what you put in it – so make sure it's the good stuff

The food you put in your body the day before and even during the tournament should be healthy, back-to-basics food choices, with plenty of lean meat and fish, fruit and vegetables, nuts and seeds. Try and base your meals on these simple food groups.

Carbohydrates

Avoid eating lots of high GI foods like sugar and white bread. Instead go for whole grain, brown carbs and low sugar choices. When you eat lots of foods with a high Glycemic Index (GI) your body senses all that carbohydrate hitting the blood stream quickly and kicks out a load of insulin to mop up all the blood glucose, leaving you with very low blood sugar a little bit later. This is not good. Your brain, being exclusively fed on carbs doesn't like this one bit and you can be sure that its 200,000-year-old instruction manual



doesn't have anything in it about staying focused on poker tournaments while being starved. The GI of a carb can be easily spotted on a lot of food packaging today. High GI foods to avoid include baked potatoes, white bread and white rice.

“I recommend three meals and two or three snacks equally spread out”

Protein

Look to get protein into your diet as it aids blood sugar regulation and slows carbohydrate absorption. Good sources of protein include lean meat, fish and some dairy products.

Fats

They're often seen as a pariah but I'm here to tell you they're essential. Your brain is to a large extent a big lump of lipid and getting enough fat from your diet is essential for your nervous system to function properly. Look for

products that are free of trans fats and low in saturated fats – they're still important, but you're probably getting plenty already. You really want to be looking for foods high in Omega 3 fats like oily fish, flax and eggs. The essential fatty acids found in fish oils, walnuts and so on, are especially useful as they have been shown to be directly related to changes in brain function.

When should you eat?

Meal times are another important factor. I recommend three meals and two or three snacks equally spread out through the day. This can help to keep your energy levels up and stop that end-of-day flagging. See the examples below for meal and snack ideas.

How much?

Be really careful what you do here as, coupled with the frequency and make-up of your food, meal size is another important factor in how your body will function in the aftermath of eating. I don't care how low GI your food choices are and how lean your meat is, if you find yourself getting up for a third plate of cold cuts your body is going to be too busy coping with the half a cow you just ate to deal properly with the cards in front of you. Little and often is the key here folks!



THE NIGHT BEFORE

What should I eat the night before?

Salmon in sesame with Chinese greens and noodles (serves one)
 One salmon steak
 1-2 heads of pak choi
 1/2 pepper, diced
 1-2 spring onions, finely chopped
 2 tbsp soy sauce
 1 clove of garlic, finely chopped
 1/2 an inch of ginger, finely chopped



- Take one salmon fillet and glaze with a little soy sauce and oil. Bake in the oven for 18-20 minutes. Take the pak choi, separate the leaves, wash and shake dry. Place them to one side.

- In a pan or wok stir fry the finely chopped garlic and ginger with the red pepper on a high heat. After a minute add the pak choi and cook for a further minute and a half before adding

the soy and/or fish sauce to taste. Once cooked add the spring onion.

- Remove salmon from the oven and immediately serve with the greens.

MORNING AFTER

What should I eat on the morning of the competition?

Sugar-free muesli,
 2 tbsp of crushed walnuts
 200g full fat yoghurt
 A small handful of mixed berries

Just mix it all up and get it in ya. Be wary of low fat yoghurts as they tend to contain a lot of sugar.



EXERCISE

When you're at the table for a 12-hour session a couple of stone can make a big difference

What better way to start the New Year and burn off those extra pounds piled on over Christmas by hitting the gym? Hell, if darts players are now pounding the treadmills and pumping weights to boost their match concentration, then you've got no excuses. In the long-term you should be looking at a programme that includes weight training, cardiovascular training and flexibility work. An example of a regime might be:

Monday 40-minute swim, stretch

Tuesday 50-minute weights Session A

Wednesday 30-minute cycle ride, stretch

Thursday 50-minute weights Session B

Friday 30-minute swim and some yoga



A little word on the weights sessions – do them in a circuit fashion for five sets of 10-12 controlled reps at the maximum weight you can properly handle with a rest of 60-90 seconds after each full rotation.

Weights Session A

Squats
Overhead press
Lateral pull-down (or pull-up)

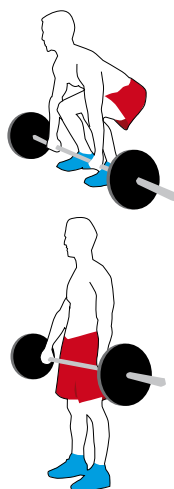
Weights Session B

Deadlift
Bench press
Bent-over row

In the short-term, immediately before and during a tournament you don't want to go over the top exercising, but a morning swim for 15 minutes and, if you have time, a light weights session in the evening, will help clear the mind and work out the stiffness of sitting over the baize all day.

Performance-enhancing drugs

We've covered smart drugs before (*PokerPlayer*, Issue 14) and they will be useful in conjunction with these basic



measures. Products such as ginkgo biloba or Spike by Biotest are useful for their long-term lift in brain function, but it's important how you take them.

Products like ginkgo or ginseng are going to work better in the long run so take them before the tournament as they're slow getting to work. Spike is the type of product to be taken around halfway through the day as it's fast acting and will last for the day's play.

BRAIN-BOOSTING SHAKE

Alternatively you can whip up your own brain-boosting cocktail. This may be useful if you're flagging or for really increased focus for a big game without having to resort to loads of caffeine and sugar.

1 pint of weak green tea
200-150mg DMAE
1-2g of Taurine
3g L Tyrosine



24-HOUR (NON-)PARTY PEOPLE

The perfect tournament plan

The following routine can be used in the days and weeks running up to a tournament. You can even continue with it through the event, making slight adjustments for start, finish and break times. Be sure that when you book your place in the tourney that you know what time you will have to get up when you're there and adjust your sleeping pattern as early as possible.

10:00 Alarm bells

This is business, not a holiday, so it's time to get up!

10:30 Exercise

Swim 20 lengths in the pool. Nothing clears the cobwebs away like a quick swim and the exercise is great for postural muscles; after all, you'll be sitting in a chair for many hours over the coming days.

And the more relaxed you are the better.

11:15 Breakfast

Sugar-free muesli, a pear, two small tubs of full fat yoghurt (low fat ones usually have lots of sugar added) and a green tea.

12:00 Play starts!

Keep sipping that water (or possibly a little weak green tea).

14:30 Snack

A small handful of mixed nuts, an apple and maybe even a low carb protein shake. This will keep energy supplies from taking a dip.

17:00 Lunch

Chicken and black bean sauce stir fry with loads of vegetables and brown rice. Lean protein and whole grain will keep you feeling full for a long time.

18:00 Flagging already?

If you're in need of a pick-me-up now might be a good time to take a dose of Spike.

20:00 Dinner

Go for salmon and a low GI option with lots of fibrous vegetables – high on brain food, low on those sleep-inducing carbohydrates.

22:00 Brain boost

If you're still going but fading fast avoid energy drinks; instead try a Brain-food shake.



00:00 End of play

Avoid the temptation of spending some time with Mr J. Daniels. Instead go for a light stretching session (and possibly even a very short weights session) to get rid of the tension of the day. Follow this with a light snack of walnuts and yoghurt.

01:00 Stop

Stop whatever you're doing immediately and get into your pre-bed routine.

01:30 Bedtime

Yeah, I know the bright lights of Vegas may be outside the window but draw those curtains – you'll thank me for it!

Always consult your doctor before starting any physical fitness programme or using mineral supplements