

DIETARY NEEDS FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

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Along with the book bags dropped around the house, it's the season for the soccer balls and sports shoes to clutter the floor. Considering the rate of obesity in our society, parents are encouraged to keep their kids physically active. Yet the after-school practices, sports schedules and long hours away from home create a nutritional challenge for the parent trying to feed these athletes.

Nutritional Goals for Young Athletes

Eating for peak performance means a balanced diet every day. Do your teen-agers get these servings in their diets on a regular basis? These basics build a healthy diet.

- 2-3 servings of lean meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs (one serving is 3 ounces)
- 3-4 servings of milk, yogurt or cheese (one serving is 1 cup of milk)
- 6-11 servings of breads, cereals, rice and pasta (one serving is one slice bread or + cup of pasta, rice or cereal)
- 2-4 servings of fruit (1 piece of fruit, + cup juice)
- 3-5 servings of vegetables (1 serving is + cup cooked or 1 cup raw)

Caloric needs are increased with strenuous exercise. Some young athletes spend two hours a day working out, plus weekend competitions. They can quickly burn calories, but may not have the energy to eat enough. If your kids are looking thinner and missing meals at home, pay careful attention to how much they eat. Increase calories by providing healthy snacks, energy bars, high-calorie nutrition drinks, and evening snacks. The best-fueled athlete is the better athlete. Athletes who strive to be too thin lack energy, strength and stamina. Too-thin athletes may be losing muscle as part of their weight loss.

Why do athletes need more carbohydrates? Carbohydrates are the body's preferred source of energy, but the body stores only limited amounts. Muscles need available carbohydrates in order to function. About 60 percent of an athlete's diet should come from foods such as breads, cereals, pasta, rice, fruits and vegetables, and then some sweets to add additional calories. After a hard practice or game, the athlete should replenish carbohydrates within two hours for the most efficient storage.

Do athletes need protein? We all need protein, but athletes need a little more than non-athletes to build and maintain muscles that are being trained for competition. However, this does not mean a large slab of steak every night. Research indicates that most athletes need about 1.0 to 1.5 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight a day. This is about 75 to 100 grams of protein per day. Offer your athlete scrambled eggs for breakfast or a protein shake, 3 ounces of lunch meat in a sandwich for lunch, and 3 to 4 ounces of chicken at dinner. Snacks -- such as peanut butter, cheese, nuts, milk and yogurt -- can provide additional protein. Carbohydrate foods also offer protein in smaller amounts.

Fluids needs are critical to good health and performance. Our bodies require about 8 cups of fluid a day, and with the additional sweating during exercise, more is needed. A 150-pound athlete can lose as much as 6 cups of fluid in one hot hour of exercise. Dehydration hurts performance by reducing endurance, and increases the risk of serious heat illness. Thirst is not a good indicator of dehydration. It is important to drink fluids before, during and after practice and competition. When fluid levels are adequate, urine will be pale yellow in color -- teach your teen-ager to be aware of this. The rule of thumb is: Drink 2 cups of fluid for every pound of fluid weight lost during a workout. Also, drink 2 cups of water 2 hours before the exercise, and + cup every 15 minutes during a strenuous workout.

What should your athlete drink? Water, juices and sports drinks are good choices for replacing fluids. Sports drinks are designed for exercise that lasts longer than 60 minutes, or for hot climates. These well-researched drinks replace the sodium and potassium lost in sweat, and because of a small carbohydrate content, they enhance fluid absorption from the stomach even more quickly than plain water. The carbohydrates also provide calories for continual energy. Sports drinks are not appropriate for a mealtime beverage -- save them for the athletic field.

Here are some tips to support your student athletes' performances with food and drink.

1. Send them to school with water bottles and sports drinks.
2. For snacks before and after practice, include in their sports bags extra sandwiches and juice boxes and additional energy (sports) bars, fruits, pretzels and crackers.
3. Be sure they are eating good breakfasts and lunches.
4. Dinner is always a challenge for the soccer mom or dad. Casseroles, soup and sandwiches, chili and planned leftovers all can be prepared ahead of time to be quickly reheated when the hungry athlete gets home.

Have a successful sports season!