



Feeding Your Child Athlete

All kids need to eat balanced meals and have a healthy diet. But should that balance change for kids who play on a sports team or work out? Maybe.

Kids need to eat the right amount and mix of foods to support that higher level of activity, but that mix might not be too different from a normal healthy diet. Eating for sports should be an extension of healthy eating for life.

Nutritional Needs of Young Athletes

Many "sports" foods and drinks, like energy bars and gels, are marketed to athletes, but most don't need them to meet their energy needs. While these products don't have magic ingredients that will improve sports performance, they can be handy when kids don't have time for a healthy meal or snack.

Because athletic kids are particularly reliant on the nutrients that a balanced diet can provide, it's usually not wise for them to diet. In sports where weight is emphasized, such as wrestling, swimming, dance, or gymnastics, kids may feel pressure to lose weight. If a coach, gym teacher, or another teammate says that your child needs to go on a diet, talk to your doctor first. If your doctor thinks your child should diet, you'll work together or with a nutritionist to develop a plan that allows your child to lose weight in a safe and healthy way.

Kids who healthy, well-balanced meals and snacks are probably getting the nutrients needed to perform well in sports. The Food Guide Pyramid can provide guidance on what kinds of foods and drinks to include in your child's meals and snacks.

But kids and teens who are involved in all-day competitions or strenuous endurance sports (like rowing, cross-country running, or competitive swimming) that can involve 1½ to 2 hours or more of activity at a time, may need to consume more food to keep up with increased energy demands.

Most athletes will naturally eat the right amount of food their bodies need. But if you're concerned that your child is getting too much or too little food, check in with your doctor.

In addition to getting the right amount of calories, it takes a variety of nutrients to keep young athletes performing at their best:

- **Vitamins and minerals:** Kids need a variety of vitamins and minerals. Calcium and iron are two important minerals for athletes. Calcium helps build strong bones to resist breaking and stress fractures. Calcium-rich foods include dairy products like milk, yogurt, and cheese, as well as leafy green vegetables such as broccoli. Iron helps carry oxygen to all the different body parts that need it. Iron-rich foods include red meat, chicken, tuna, salmon, eggs, dried fruits, leafy green vegetables, and whole grains.
- **Protein:** Protein is needed to build and repair muscles, but most kids get plenty of protein

through a balanced diet. Strong muscles come from regular training and exercise and too much protein can lead to dehydration and calcium loss. Protein-rich foods include fish, lean red meat and poultry, dairy products, nuts, soy products, and peanut butter.

- **Carbohydrates:** Carbs provide energy for the body. Some diet plans have urged weight-conscious adults to steer clear of carbs, but for a young athlete they're an important source of fuel. There's no need for "carb loading" (eating a lot of carbs in advance of a big game), but without carbs in their diet, kids will be running on empty. When you're choosing carbs, look for whole-grain foods like whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, whole-grain bread and cereal, and plenty of fruits and vegetables.

Drink Up!

It's important for young athletes to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, which can zap strength, energy, and coordination and lead to heat-related illness. Even mild dehydration can affect athletic performance.

Thirst is not a reliable indicator of hydration status so experts recommend that kids drink water or other fluids every 15 to 20 minutes during physical activity. It's important to drink afterwards to restore fluid lost through sweat.

Although many sports drinks are available, plain water is usually enough to keep kids hydrated. Sports drinks are designed to provide energy and replace electrolytes — such as sodium and potassium — that athletes lose in sweat.

Sports drinks are a good choice if kids are active for more than 1 hour because after exercising for 60 to 90 minutes, the body has used up its readily available sources of energy. Sports drinks are also a good alternative if kids aren't drinking enough water.

Diluted juice is another option but avoid carbonated beverages that can upset the stomach.

The bottom line is that for most young athletes, water is the best choice for hydration. After the activity, carbohydrates and electrolytes can be replenished.

Pressures Facing Athletes

Some school-age athletes face unique pressures involving nutrition and body weight. In some sports, it's common for kids to feel they need to radically increase or reduce their weight to reach peak performance.

In sports where weight or appearance is emphasized, such as wrestling, swimming, dance, or gymnastics, kids may feel pressure to lose weight. Because athletic kids need extra fuel, it's usually not a good idea for them to diet.

Unhealthy eating habits, like crash dieting, can leave kids with less strength and endurance and poorer mental concentration. Similar performance issues can come up when kids try to increase their weight too fast for sports where size matters, such as football or hockey. When a person overeats, the food the body can't immediately use gets stored as fat. As a result, kids who overeat may gain weight, not muscle, and their physical fitness will be diminished.

If a coach, gym teacher, or teammate says that your child needs to lose or gain weight, or if you're concerned about your child's eating habits, talk to your doctor. The doctor can work with you and your child or refer you to a dietician to develop a plan that allows your child to work on the weight in a safe and healthy way.

Game Day

It's important for kids to eat well on game days. The meal itself should not be very different from what they've eaten throughout training.

A meal 3 hours or more before activity should have plenty of carbs and a moderate amount of protein but be low in fat because fat takes longer to digest, which can cause an upset stomach. High-fiber foods may also cause some stomach upset, so it's best to avoid these foods until after the game.

If kids eat less than 3 hours before game or practice, serve a lighter meal or snack that includes easy-to-digest carbohydrate-containing foods, such as fruit, fruit or vegetable juice, crackers, or bread.

After the game or event, experts recommend eating carbs (fruit, pretzels, a sports drink, etc.) within 30 minutes after intense activity and again 2 hours later. Your child's body will be rebuilding muscle tissue and replenishing energy stores and fluids for up to 24 hours after the competition. So it's important that the post-game meal be a balance of lean protein, carbs, and fat.

And remember, when packing your child's bag for the big day, add a water bottle or sports drink.

Meal and Snack Suggestions

A good breakfast for young athletes might include low-fat yogurt with some granola and a banana, or whole-grain cereal and milk with sliced strawberries. Try bean burritos with low-fat cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes or a turkey sandwich and fruit for lunch. For dinner, serve grilled chicken breasts with steamed rice and vegetables, or pasta with red sauce and lean ground beef, along with a salad. Good snacks include pretzels, raisins, crackers, string cheese, or fruit.

It's important to feed your child healthy meals and snacks consistently, even during the off-season. This will provide a solid foundation during times of competition.

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