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Fueling Your Child's Performance Nutrition for the Young Athlete



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Child athletes need to eat well to support a higher level of activity, but that balance is not much different from a normal healthy diet. Eating for sports/fitness is eating well for life.

Dietary needs of the young athlete

Foods and beverages marketed for “sports” are not the key to improve sports performance. They can be handy when children are short on time. Many sports foods and drinks, like energy bars and gels, are marketed to athletes, but most children do not require these things to meet their energy and nutrient needs.

Children who eat a healthy well-balanced diet are most likely getting the energy and nutrients needed to perform well in sports. However, when children and teens are involved in all-day competitions or strenuous endurance sports that can involve one and one half to two hours or more of constant activity, they may need to consume more food and fluid to keep up with the increased demands on their bodies. It also takes a variety of nutrients to keep young athletes performing at their best – a balanced diet is the key:

Vitamins and minerals: Children need a variety of vitamins and minerals. The best way to assure that your child is getting what he/she needs is to make sure they are eating

a balanced diet – heavy on plant foods like vegetables, fruit, whole grains, beans, nuts/seeds; and moderate in animal foods like lean meat, fish, poultry and dairy; and very light on extras like desserts and added fats and sugars.

Carbohydrates: Carbohydrates provide energy for the body. When you are choosing carbohydrates, look for whole-grain foods like brown rice, whole-grain bread, pasta and cereal, and lots of fruits and vegetables.

Protein: Protein helps build and repair muscles. Most children get plenty of protein from a balanced diet. Protein-rich foods include fish, lean meat and poultry, dairy products, beans and lentils, nuts, soy products, and nut butters.

Fat: Fat plays an important role in the body, as long as you eat the right amount. Good food sources of fats include avocado, nuts and seeds, nut butters, and plant oils like olive oil.

Keeping hydrated

It's important for young athletes to drink plenty of fluids. Dehydration can wipe out an athlete's strength and coordination, and may even lead to heat-related illness.

Children must drink water or other fluids every 15 to 20 minutes during physical activity. It is also important to drink following activity to restore fluid lost through sweat. Sports drinks are an option, but plain water is

usually best to keep children hydrated. Sports drinks are designed to provide energy in the form of sugar and replace electrolytes that are lost in sweat. Sports drinks are a good choice when children are sweating and active for more than an hour.

Feeding young athletes during and after events

It is important for children to eat well on event days. The meal itself should not be very different from what they were eating during training or even the off-season. A meal three hours or more before activity should have plenty of carbohydrates, a moderate amount of protein and be low in fat.

If a child must sooner than three hours before an event, serve a light snack like fruit, fruit or vegetable juice or toast. Following the game or event, children should have a quick snack to replace carbohydrates, like chocolate milk. Once home, the athlete will be ready for a healthy balanced meal containing carbohydrates, protein, fat (chicken, salad, steamed broccoli and wild rice). Remember, athletic performance may require a slightly enhanced diet, but it is always important to feed your child healthy meals and snacks no matter what the season.

Resources:

“Care of the Young Athlete.” American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons Editors: Sally S. Harris, MD, MPH, FAAP and Steven J. Anderson, MD, FAAP