

A Guide to Eating for Sports

“There is a choice you have to make in everything you do. So keep in mind that in the end the choice you make, makes you.” John Wooden

Eat Extra for Excellence

There's a lot more to eating for sports than chowing down on carbs or chugging sports drinks. The good news is that eating to reach your peak performance level likely doesn't require a special diet or supplements. It's all about working the right foods into your fitness plan in the right amounts.

Teen athletes have unique nutrition needs. Because athletes work out more than their less-active peers, they generally need extra calories to fuel both their sports performance and their growth. Depending on how active they are, teen athletes may need anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 total calories per day to meet their energy needs.

So what happens if teen athletes don't eat enough? Their bodies are less likely to achieve peak performance and may even break down rather than build up muscles. Athletes who don't take in enough calories every day won't be as fast and as strong as they could be and may not be able to maintain their weight. And extreme calorie restriction could lead to growth problems and other serious health risks for both girls and guys.

Athletes and Dieting

Since teen athletes need extra fuel, it's usually a bad idea to diet. Athletes in sports where weight is emphasized — such as wrestling, swimming, dance, or gymnastics — might feel pressure to lose weight, but they need to weigh that choice with the possible negative side effects mentioned above.

If a coach, gym teacher, or teammate says that you need to go on a diet, talk to your doctor first or visit a dietitian who specializes in teen athletes. If a health professional you trust agrees that it's safe to diet, he or she can work with you to develop a plan that allows you get the proper amount of nutrients, perform your best, and lose weight.

Eat a Variety of Foods

You may have heard about "carb loading" before a game. But when it comes to powering your game for the long haul, it's a bad idea to focus on only one type of food.

Carbohydrates are an important source of fuel, but they're only one of many foods an athlete needs. It also takes vitamins, minerals, protein, and fats to stay in peak playing shape.

Muscular Minerals and Vital Vitamins

Calcium helps build the strong bones that athletes depend on, and iron carries oxygen to muscles. Most teens don't get enough of these minerals, and that's especially true of teen athletes because their needs may be even higher than those of other teens.

To get the iron you need, eat lean red meats (meats with not much fat on them); green, leafy vegetables; and iron-fortified cereals. Calcium — a must for protecting against stress fractures — is found in dairy foods, such as low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese.

In addition to calcium and iron, you need a whole bunch of other vitamins and minerals that do everything from help you access energy to keep you from getting sick. Eating a balanced diet, including lots of different fruits and veggies, should provide the vitamins and minerals needed for good health and sports performance.

Protein Power

Athletes may need more protein than less-active teens, but most teen athletes get plenty of protein through regular eating. It's a myth that athletes need a huge daily intake of protein to build large, strong muscles. Muscle growth comes from regular training and hard work. And taking in too much protein can actually harm the body, causing dehydration, calcium loss, and even kidney problems.

Good sources of protein are fish, lean meats and poultry, eggs, dairy, nuts, soy, and peanut butter.

Carb Charge

Carbohydrates provide athletes with an excellent source of fuel. Cutting back on carbs or following low-carb diets isn't a good idea for athletes because restricting carbohydrates can cause a person to feel tired and worn out, which ultimately affects performance.

Good sources of carbohydrates include fruits, vegetables, and grains. Choose whole grains (such as brown rice, oatmeal, whole-wheat bread) more often than their more processed counterparts like white rice and white bread. That's because whole grains provide both the energy athletes need to perform and the fiber and other nutrients they need to be healthy.

Sugary carbs such as candy bars or sodas are less healthy for athletes because they don't contain any of the other nutrients you need. In addition, eating candy bars or other sugary snacks just before practice or competition can give athletes a quick burst of energy and then leave them to "crash" or run out of energy before they've finished working out.

Fat Fuel

Everyone needs a certain amount of fat each day, and this is particularly true for athletes. That's because active muscles quickly burn through carbs and need fats for long-lasting energy. Like carbs, not all fats are created equal. Experts advise athletes to concentrate on healthier fats, such as the unsaturated fat found in most vegetable oils.

Choosing when to eat fats is also important for athletes. Fatty foods can slow digestion, so it's a good idea to avoid eating these foods for a few hours before and after exercising.

Shun Supplements

Protein and energy bars don't do a whole lot of good, but they won't really do you much harm either. But other types of supplements can really do some damage.

Anabolic steroids can seriously mess with a person's hormones, causing side effects like testicular shrinkage and baldness in guys and facial hair growth in girls. Steroids can cause mental health problems, including depression and serious mood swings.

Some supplements contain hormones that are related to testosterone (such as dehydroepiandrosterone, or DHEA for short). These supplements can have similar side effects to anabolic steroids. Other sports supplements (like creatine, for example) have not been tested in people younger than 18. So the risks of taking them are not yet known.

Salt tablets are another supplement to watch out for. People take them to avoid dehydration, but salt tablets can actually lead to dehydration. In large amounts, salt can cause nausea, vomiting, cramps, and diarrhea and may damage the lining of the stomach. In general, you are better off drinking fluids in order to maintain hydration. Any salt you lose in sweat can usually be made up with sports drinks or food eaten after exercise.

Ditch Dehydration

Speaking of dehydration, water is just as important to unlocking your game power as food. When you sweat during exercise, it's easy to become overheated, headachy, and worn out — especially in hot or humid weather. Even mild dehydration can affect an athlete's physical and mental performance.

There's no one-size-fits-all formula for how much water to drink. How much fluid each person needs depends on the individual's age, size, level of physical activity, and environmental temperature.

Experts recommend that athletes drink before and after exercise as well as every 15 to 20 minutes during exercise. Don't wait until you feel thirsty, because thirst is a sign that your body has needed liquids for a while. But don't force yourself to drink more fluids than you may need either. It's hard to run when there's a lot of water sloshing around in your stomach!

If you like the taste of sports drinks better than regular water, then it's OK to drink them. But it's important to know that a sports drink is really no better for you than water unless you are exercising for more than 60 to 90 minutes or in really hot weather. The additional carbohydrates and electrolytes may improve performance in these conditions, but otherwise your body will do just as well with water.

Avoid drinking carbonated drinks or juice because they could give you a stomachache while you're competing.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a diuretic, meaning it causes a person to urinate (pee) more. It's not clear whether this causes dehydration or not, but to be safe, it's wise to stay away from too much caffeine if you'll be exercising in hot weather.

Although some studies have found that caffeine may help with endurance sports performance, it's good to weigh any benefits against potential problems. Too much caffeine can leave an athlete feeling anxious or jittery. It can also cause trouble sleeping. All of these can drag down a person's sports performance. Plus, taking certain medications — including supplements — can make caffeine's side effects seem even worse.

Game-Day Eats

Most of your body's energy on game day will come from the foods you've eaten over the past several days. But you can boost your performance even more by paying attention to the food you eat on game day. Strive for a game-day diet rich in carbohydrates, moderate in protein, and low in fat.

Here are some guidelines on what to eat and when:

Eat a meal 2 to 4 hours before the game or event: Choose a protein and carbohydrate meal (like a turkey or chicken sandwich, cereal and milk, chicken noodle soup and yogurt, or pasta with tomato sauce).

Eat a snack less than 2 hours before the game: If you haven't had time to have a pre-game meal, be sure to have a light snack such as low-fiber fruits or vegetables (like plums, melons, cherries, carrots), crackers, a bagel, or low-fat yogurt.

Consider not eating anything for the hour before you compete or have practice because digestion requires energy — energy that you want to use to win. Also, eating too soon before any kind of activity can leave food in the stomach, making you feel full, bloated, crampy, and sick.

Everyone is different, so get to know what works best for you. You may want to experiment with meal timing and how much to eat on practice days so that you're better prepared for game day.

Want to get an eating plan personalized for you? The U.S. government has developed a website, MyPyramid, that tells a person how much to eat from different food groups based on age, gender, and activity level.

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit www.wellercenter.org.