

# Sports Nutrition for Young Athletes

For young athletes, choosing to eat healthfully can be a winning strategy to achieve optimal performance in sports. Making smart food choices can give you energy to improve your athletic ability, maintain your body weight, and protect and repair your bones and muscles if they're injured. If you eat a nutritious breakfast, get enough protein and carbohydrates, choose good snacks, and stay hydrated, you can prove yourself on any field or court. To ensure that you're eating the right foods, put together an all-star team of advisers that include your parents, doctors and nutritionists. While the appropriate diet for you may depend on factors, like your gender, height, weight and level of physical activity, there are certain guidelines that always score points with health-conscious doctors and nutritionists.

To determine the appropriate diet for kids who are involved in athletics, parents, medical professionals and nutritionists often first look to the food pyramid and its five food groups of fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, and protein sources for guidance. These food groups are arranged into a pyramid and show how much of each should be eaten per day to get enough vitamins, minerals, protein and carbohydrates to support kids' healthy minds and bodies. Certain foods in the pyramid, like those that are rich in carbohydrates and protein, are great fuel for active teenagers. Since teenagers burn countless calories during training or participating in sports, their diet and caloric intake may need to be modified.

One factor that can influence how many calories that you need to keep healthy and fit is the intensity of your workouts or training sessions. A high-intensity 30-minute workout can require that you eat a different amount of calories than a 30-minute low-intensity one. Consider how many times a week that you work out and for how long. Another clue that can give you an idea about what to eat can be the particular sport that you play: some contact sports, like football, may require that you eat protein to help repair your muscles, but other sports, like swimming, may necessitate a diet full of vegetables and fruit to keep your weight down. Serious athletes can talk to a physician who specializes in sports medicine or a nutritionist to come up with a specific meal plan so that they can reach their goals.

Generally, it's not a good idea to put yourself on a restrictive diet. Growing boys and girls – even those that need to remain trim for athletic performance – need to adopt healthy, balanced diets so that their bodies can function normally and reach their full potential. It's important to remember that fad diets and some supplements can do more harm to the body than good. Talk to your parents or your doctor before cutting out certain foods, skipping meals or adding something brand new to your eating habits.

Staying hydrated can help you perform at your best and can protect you from a number of health problems. Since athletes tend to lose water by sweating through intense or prolonged physical activity, you need to drink plenty of water to replenish your body's fluids while you're participating in sports. In addition, your water intake should increase before and after your workouts, games, and competitions. Avoid drinking caffeinated

beverages and sport drinks – these beverages should be considered rare treats because of the amount of caffeine, sugar, and calories included in them.

Breakfast is an important meal of the day for everyone, but this is especially true for young athletes. What you put into your body in the morning can significantly influence how your body performs during the day. If you're training or competing in the early afternoon, consider eating a breakfast that includes protein and carbohydrates about four hours before your scheduled event. Generally, you should plan meals so that they have very little fiber and fat in them; boiled eggs, tortillas, spinach, mozzarella, bananas and peanut butter are all types of foods that you can mix and match to create a breakfast that will fuel your energy levels. Avoid breakfast bars or sports bars for breakfast – while they may seem convenient, they can be loaded with sugar and you'll need a more balanced first meal of the day to reach optimum energy levels.

Healthy snacks can help stop hunger, give you energy and keep you healthy. Combine natural or fresh snacks with healthy fats to increase your protein intake while on-the-go; for example, you can eat apple slices topped with peanut butter, dip celery sticks into hummus or add dried fruit into a yogurt cup and top the combination with granola for a flavorful treat. Smoothies made of fruit can be both refreshing and nutritious. For busy teenagers who want a no-fuss snack, nuts like almonds, peanuts, walnuts or pistachios can keep hunger in check. When planning your snacks, refer to food charts to make sure that your portion sizes are appropriate to maintain your weight.

Source: Ohio University

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