

Nutrition For The Active Athlete In All Of Us!!!

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Whether you are a world class athlete, an exercise enthusiast, a weekend warrior or a playground hound – nutrition is fundamental for fitness. A varied amount of exercise and a balanced eating plan that supplies the right amount of nutrients and energy, or fuel, is essential for achieving and maintaining strength, flexibility and endurance. Many athletes that complain of constant fatigue and have trouble recovering after workouts may simply need to look at their eating habits.

What is a balance eating plan to fuel up for fitness?

This includes adequate fluids and plenty of low fat, high carbohydrate foods. This is where the fuel for energy comes from. All athletes need to think about nutritional fuel before, during and especially after exercise.

Why are carbohydrates so important for athletes?

Carbohydrates are the main sources of energy for working muscles. That's why carbohydrate-containing foods should comprise around 60% of the calories in an athletes eating plan. Muscles replenish stored carbohydrates within the first two hours after exercise. After competition you need to be thinking about refueling! Your recovery nutrition plan should include lots of fluid, that contain salt as well, and approximately 200-400 carbohydrate calories as soon as tolerable after exercise, and then again two hours later.

Here are some suggestions for 200-400 calories of carbohydrates:

- 1 pint of chocolate milk
- 2 slices of peanut butter toast
- Grilled cheese sandwich
- 1 cup of grapes and a bagel
- 1 cup of yogurt topped with 1 cup of fresh berries
- 1 oz of cereal with ½ cup of skim milk and ½ cup of sliced bananas
- 12 oz. orange, grapefruit or cranberry juice

The “Magic Meal” does not exist!!!

One good meal prior to competition can not make up for a consistently inadequate diet. The best practice is to eat more carbohydrates for several days prior to competition. The pre-event meal should be low in fat, protein, fiber and anything else that makes the stomach and intestines work harder and could possibly lead to cramping. The timing is also important as you need to allow for proper digestion and absorption of the nutrients and fuel. One hour should be appropriate for a small snack of less than 200 calories, while a meal larger than 400 calories may require up to four hours for complete digestion. Carbohydrates take the least amount of time to digest and are readily converted into energy. Foods high in protein fall between fats and carbohydrates in length of digestion. One final consideration to make when planning a pre-competition meal is the type of activity the athlete is competing in. Low impact, endurance athletes may tolerate residual food in the digestive system better than athletes participating in high impact, speed burst activities.

What’s the deal with supplements?

This is a very hotly debated topic. The August 2005 edition of *Pediatrics*, the scientific publication of the American Academy of Pediatrics, reports that 8 percent of girls and 12 percent of boys surveyed admitted to using supplements in an effort to enhance their physique. These results suggest that girls may use unhealthy means to achieve low body weight where as boys may use unhealthy ways to improve muscle mass or strength. Athletes are prime targets for nutrition fraud and the use of these products is associated with a variety of factors. Young impressionable athletes are often concerned with their body image and are easily influenced by the media. If they are dissatisfied with their body they may turn to different supplements to alter their body composition. These over the counter supplements, often found in nutrition stores and on-line, are not regulated by the FDA. Therefore they are not responsible for the accuracy of the label and the contents of their product. These supplements include products such as protein powders, creatine, amino acids, mega-dose vitamins/minerals, weight loss aids, energy boosters, etc. We need to make sure athletes understand that they can get closer to their goals by properly fueling their bodies with food first, not supplements.

Leslie Bonci, MPH, RD, director of Sports Nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh gives these tips for “Eating for Optimum Performance”:

- eat within one hour of waking up
- eat every three to four hours throughout the day
- eat within two hours following exercise

- a glass of chocolate milk, yogurt, or a smoothie tastes good, is easy to consume and costs less than a protein shake.
- a granola or high carbohydrate sports bar, or a sports drink prior to exercise will provide energy for sport.

Bonci states that we need to “remind athletes that they need fuel the most when they want it the least. Just as they train their muscles for sport, they need to train their gut to accommodate fuel and fluid. Eating is one of the few variables an athlete CAN control. Muscles need to be fueled for performance and body composition changes cannot occur without some focus on food choices as well as eating habits.

Planning training and competition meals, whether you are feeding one person or an entire team, requires creativity and flexibility that allows for the individuality of each athlete. Your Certified Athletic Trainer may be of more help with this process. You can also find great information and more examples at www.mypyrimid.gov.

Consult your primary care physician for more serious injuries that do not respond to basic first aid. As an added resource, the staff at Nationwide Children's Sports Medicine is available to diagnose and treat sports-related injuries for youth or adolescent athletes. To make an appointment, call 614-355-6000.