



Athletic Nutrition for Young Athletes

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In a period when many parents enroll their children in organized sports, it is imperative that basic nutrition guidelines for young athletes be followed. This will help these children to progress to their desirable potentials. Along with their improvement in performance, a healthy diet may reduce injury, reduce recovery time between competitions, make them feel better both physically and mentally, and create healthy eating habits for life.

The guidelines to youth sport nutrition focus on getting the athlete enough energy and the right kinds of energy for the rigorous demands on their active bodies. A child should always receive a good meal at least an hour or two before practice or competition. In addition, you must encourage your youth athlete to eat a lot of food frequently. They need more fuel than the normal adult population due to their growth alone, but when physical activity comes into play, an increased amount of energy is called for.

An effective way to ensure that your athlete does not go hungry is to place nonperishable items such as pretzels or sports bars in their book bags or practice gear bags. Even extra calories, such as those found in fruits or sports drinks, during practice is highly recommended.

The food pyramid is an excellent guide for parents to follow when deciding on what to feed their young athletes. Youngsters should be ingesting plenty of carbohydrates with unsaturated fat. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains and easily digestible foods are recommended. Junk foods, which are high in simple sugars and saturated fats, should be avoided, especially before activity. The sugars may create a quick burst of energy followed by a dive in energy levels. The fatty foods are hard to digest. For the adolescent athlete, it is important to watch calcium and iron levels. In periods of rapid growth, athletes are especially susceptible to deficiencies in these areas. Most importantly, proper hydration must be stressed. Dehydration greatly hampers performance and may even lead to heat stress or even heat stroke in extreme cases. Water (or sports drinks or diluted fruit juice) should always be on hand and readily available for young athletes at practices and competitions.

Lastly, refueling your athlete after activity is equally important but it is often overlooked. Nutritious meals help speed up the recovery process and replace nutrients that have been lost. If the athletes are rewarded for their performances in the way of sweets or fast food, it must be stressed that they should only receive these treats after their game and not as a replacement for regular meals. Following these guidelines will result in a youth athlete who can perform at optimal levels.

Editor's note: Erin O'Neill is a former collegiate soccer player and currently a graduate assistant strength and conditioning coach at Virginia Tech.

Article contributed by Coaching Youth Sports, an online newsletter presenting information about learning and performing sport skills.



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