

# Feeding Your Child Athlete

Healthy, well-balanced meals and snacks give kids the nutrients they need to do well in sports. Besides getting the right amount of calories, eating a variety of nutritious foods will help them play at their best.

## Nutritional Needs of Young Athletes

Active, athletic kids and teens need:

- **Vitamins and minerals:** Kids need a variety of vitamins and minerals. Calcium and iron are two important minerals for athletes:
  - Calcium helps build strong bones to resist breaking and stress fractures. Calcium-rich foods include low-fat dairy products like milk, yogurt, and cheese, as well as leafy green vegetables such as broccoli.
  - Iron helps carry oxygen to all the different body parts that need it. Iron-rich foods include lean meat, chicken, tuna, salmon, eggs, dried fruits, leafy green vegetables, and fortified whole grains.
- **Protein:** Protein helps build and repair muscles, and most kids get plenty of it through a balanced diet. Protein-rich foods include fish, lean meat and poultry, dairy products, beans, nuts, and soy products.
- **Carbohydrates:** Carbs provide energy for the body and are an important source of fuel for a young athlete. Without carbs in their diet, kids will be running on empty. When choosing carbs, look for whole-grain foods like whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, whole-grain bread and cereal, and plenty of fruits and vegetables.

Most young athletes eat the right amount of food their bodies need. Some young athletes, though, have higher energy and fluid needs. All-day competitions or intense endurance sports (like rowing, cross-country running, or competitive swimming) can involve 1½ to 2 hours or more of activity at a time. Kids and teens who do these may need to eat more food to keep up with increased energy demands.

The MyPlate food guide offers tips on what kinds of foods and drinks to include in your child's meals and snacks.

## Drink Up!

It's important for young athletes to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, which can zap strength, energy, and coordination and lead to heat-related illness. Even mild dehydration can affect athletic performance.

Athletes can't rely on thirst to tell if they're getting dehydrated. Thirst is a sign that their body has needed liquids for a while. Kids should drink water before physical activity and every 15 to 20 minutes throughout. They also should drink water afterward to restore fluid lost through sweat.

Many sports drinks are available, but plain water is usually enough to keep kids hydrated. Kids should avoid sugary drinks and carbonated beverages that can upset the stomach. Sports drinks can be a good choice for

kids who do intense physical activity for more than 1 hour.

The bottom line is that for most young athletes, water is the best choice for hydration.

## Pressures Facing Athletes

Some school-age athletes face pressures involving nutrition and body weight. In some sports, it's common for kids to feel they need to increase or reduce their weight to reach peak performance.

In sports that emphasize weight or appearance, such as wrestling, swimming, dance, or gymnastics, kids may feel pressure to lose weight. Because athletic kids need extra fuel, it's usually not a good idea for them to diet. Unhealthy eating habits, like crash dieting, can leave kids with less strength and endurance and poor concentration.

When kids try to increase their weight too fast for sports where size matters, such as football or hockey, their performance may also suffer. When a person overeats, the food the body can't use right away gets stored as fat. As a result, kids who overeat may gain weight, not muscle.

If a coach, gym teacher, or teammate says that your child needs to lose or gain weight, or if you're concerned about your child's eating habits, talk to your doctor. The doctor can work with you or refer you to a dietitian to develop a healthy eating plan for your young athlete.

## Game Day

Kids need to eat well on game days. The meal itself should not be very different from what they've eaten throughout training. Athletes can choose healthy foods they believe enhance their performance and don't cause any problems like stomach upset.

Here are some general guidelines:

- A meal 3 to 4 hours before activity should have plenty of carbs and some protein but be low in fat. Fat takes longer to digest, which can cause an upset stomach. Carbs could include pasta, bread, fruits, and vegetables. Avoid sugary foods and drinks.
- If kids eat less than 3 hours before a game or practice, serve a lighter meal or snack that includes easy-to-digest carb-containing foods, such as fruit, crackers, or bread.
- After the game or event, experts recommend eating within 30 minutes after intense activity and again 2 hours later. The body will be rebuilding muscle and replenishing energy stores and fluids. Kids should continue to hydrate and eat a balance of lean protein and carbs.

Athletes need to eat the right amount and mix of foods to support their higher level of activity. But that mix might not be too different from a normal healthy diet. Eating for sports should be another part of healthy eating for life.

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