

Nutrition of young athletes

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Abstract Research surrounding the nutrition of young athletes suggests that they are at risk for becoming deficient in most of their vital nutrients. Most parents agree there is concern for this issue, but they fear they do not have enough information on how to fix the problem. This literature review includes several professionals and experienced groups' opinions and highlights the ways to tackle the issue of nutritional deficiencies and the many pressures young athletes face. Nutrition for Young Athletes

Young athletes face a multitude of challenges especially those that surround their diet. The social, emotional, and physical aspects of their growing bodies can present unique dilemmas that parents of young athletes may not know how to approach. When training them on the proper techniques to be an all-star player it should always include a well-balanced diet along with positive affirmations. For those who are looking for solutions to a proper diet for young athletes, busy lifestyles, pre and post activity meals and emotional pressures dietitians and doctors are finding the right information.

It may be demanding for parents when one or more of their children are athletes. This can challenge their abilities to multi-task and unhealthy food choices may result from a hectic family sporting lifestyle. Carmen, a mom and article writer from gatorade.com, gives the busy parent helpful tips on how to choose better options from fast-food menus. Treating the family does not have to consist of greasy burgers and fries every time one visits McDonald's, but choosing one of their snack wraps loaded with grilled chicken and the salad with no dressing will only amount to 300 calories (Carmen, 2011).

Even Starbuck's now offers on-the-go choices that include fresh fruit plates with cheese and protein packed plates that include hard boiled eggs and peanut butter. It is important to remember that proteins are just one of the many nutrients needed to complete a well-balanced diet for budding athletes. The University of Waikato in New Zealand offers plenty of information for a parent in search of what particular nutrients are needed and in what amounts. The nutrients that should compose young athlete's diet are under two categories, Micro and Macro.

Under the micronutrient category are calcium, iron, B-complex vitamins, and zinc. These vitamins and minerals are only needed in small amounts but are essential to the growth and development of children including their immune functions (The University of Waikato, 2011). Macronutrients, which are needed in large amounts, include the energy supplier's carbohydrates, proteins, and fats (The University of Waikato, 2011). Current research suggests that more young athletes are showing deficiencies in all of these nutrients (Nisevich, 2008).

To gain the proper amounts of vitamins and nutrients one should look first to food sources. Although there are vitamin supplements for young children, supplements are not the ideal source for these nutrients. Calcium rich foods such as milk, broccoli and other green vegetables support the growth of bones and increase their mass; they also help in the contraction of muscles and the impulses of nerves (Nisevich, 2008). Iron, which can be found in meat and beans, is " a major player in the role of energy metabolism of carbohydrates, protein, and fats" (Nisevich, 2008, para.). Zinc and B-complex vitamins which include folic acid, niacin, riboflavin, B6, B12 and

thiamin are used primarily to help the blood. Zinc supports tissue growth and wound healing while B-complex vitamins help to keep muscles from getting sore and maintain cognitive brain function (Nisevich, 2008). If a diet is well-balanced in meats, fish, beans, and dairy those vitamins and minerals should be in adequate levels within the body. Consciously selecting what goes in the bodies is the key to living and performing at one's best.

When young athletes are exposed to strenuous workouts pre and post activity meals as well as proper hydration are all crucial for their bodies. Activities lasting for at least one and half to two hours should be considered strenuous, especially sports such as rowing, cross-country running, and competitive swimming (Gavin, 2011). On a big day of activities meals should be given three hours prior to the event that deliver ample amounts of carbohydrates and low fats (Gavin, 2011).

These types of food are converted into energy and the body will utilize them throughout the activity. Adding good carbohydrates such as whole grain cereals with low fat milk, peanut butter on whole wheat toast with half an apple, or lean meat on a pita with orange juice are ways to pack energy boosting foods into snacks (Baylor College of Medicine, 2004). Planning a healthy snack can benefit young athletes especially during performances. Before, during, and after an event are times when it is crucial to hydrate. It is needed on many levels for the body to function properly.

Water supplies energy, strength as well as coordination and parents, coaches and young athletes should know that “ even mild dehydration can affect performance” (Gavin, 2011, pg. 2). According to Collins (2007), a noted dietitian, drinking 5-9 ounces of water every 15-20 minutes depending

on age and size is recommended. Collins (2007) also mentions that parents can weigh children before and after an event to determine how much fluid has been lost, drinking one cup per half pound they have lost will replenish their bodies.

According to a known medical educator, Mary Gavin (2011), “ after exercising for sixty to ninety minutes, the body has used up its readily available sources of energy; so sports drinks may be a good choice for kids who participate in strenuous activity for more than an hour” (p. 2). The nutrients in sports drinks such as sodium and potassium are exactly what athlete’s need when they are active for long periods to replace what was lost through sweat, but water should still be their main source of hydration (Gavin, 2011). Sports have long been associated with proving how tough you are through stamina and strength.

In my opinion, these attributes can be helpful as well as harmful to an impressionable child athlete. Teammates that seem “ stronger and better” can create a poor self-image within a young athlete who doesn’t feel he or she fits the physical criteria that coaches are looking for. Devastating effects can result from forcing the body to achieve optimal appearance. Athletes may increase weight and mass by overeating to try and reach desired outcomes while unknowingly putting their selves at risk. “ When a person overeats, the food the body can’t immediately use gets stored as fat” (Gavin, 2011, p.). Other types of athletes may try crash diets to lose weight for sports like wrestling, gymnastics, swimming and dance. This behavior leads to “ less strength and endurance and poor mental concentration” (Gavin, 2011, p. 2). It is easy to buckle under the pressures of sports, but an

emphasis on positive self talk and giving pats on the back for a job well done go a long way in a child. Reminding a child that it is just a game and everyone gets hurt and feels pain can bring feelings of lowered self-confidence into perspective.

When the media splashes drug use and misconduct of famous athletes who children idolize in the news can create challenges for the child and the parent. It may help to explain the hard realities of the pressures to performance to a child by instilling simple values that shape their existence. In my opinion, simple values will give them a firm footing in life and a level head when they are faced with challenging life decisions. The list of questions concerning nutritious foods and sports pressures are endless.

The known facts about micro- and macro-nutrients help tremendously when it comes to preparing snacks for young athletes and their sporting events. Fast-food choices can now be made without ruining the waistline from meals that contain excess calories and fat, therefore giving relief to busy parents of young athletes. Overeating and under eating are becoming a higher priority among doctors, dietitians and parents. As the pressure to perform is increasing, the need to educate young athletes and their parents on proper nutrition is paramount.

The parent's ability to obtain accurate information about nutrition from trusted bloggers, doctors, and dietitians can make the process of raising healthy young athletes much easier.