

# Do You Know How to Feed Your Child Athlete?

(From <http://kidshealth.org>)

All kids need to eat balanced meals and have a healthy diet. But should that balance change if your child is on a sports team or working out? Maybe. Your child needs to eat the right mix of foods to support that higher level of activity, but that mix might not be too different than what is considered a healthy diet. Eating for sports should be an extension of healthy eating for life.

There are many "sports" foods and drinks marketed to athletes, like energy bars and gels. In general, most young athletes do not need these products to meet their energy needs. These products don't have magic ingredients that will improve a child's sports performance, but they can come in handy if your child doesn't have time to prepare a healthy meal or snack.

Because athletic kids are particularly reliant on the nutrients that a balanced diet can provide, it's usually not a good idea for them to diet. In sports where weight is emphasized, such as wrestling, swimming, dance, or gymnastics, your child may feel pressure to lose weight. If a coach, gym teacher, or another teammate says that your child needs to go on a diet, talk to your doctor first. If your doctor thinks your child should diet, the doctor can work with your child or refer you to a nutritionist to develop a plan that allows your child to work on the weight in a safe and healthy way.

## What Are the Nutritional Needs of Young Athletes?

If your child is eating healthy, well-balanced meals and snacks, your child is probably getting the nutrients that he or she needs to perform well in sports. The new food guide pyramid, called MyPyramid, can provide guidance on what kinds of foods and drinks should be included in your child's well-balanced meals and snacks.

But kids who are involved in strenuous endurance sports like cross-country running or competitive swimming, which involve 1 1/2 to 2 hours of activity at a time, may need to consume more food to keep up with their increased energy demands. Most athletic young people will naturally crave the amount of food their bodies need, but if you are concerned that your child is getting too much or too little food, you may want to check in with your child's doctor.

Because different foods have different combinations of these nutrients, it's important to vary your child's meals and snacks as much as possible. It's a good idea to make sure that your child is getting the following nutrients:

**Vitamins and minerals:** Your child needs a variety of vitamins and minerals. Brightly colored foods such as spinach, carrots, squash, and peppers tend to be packed with them. It's especially important your child get plenty of calcium and iron. Calcium helps your child build healthy bones, which are important especially if your child breaks a bone or gets a stress fracture. Calcium-rich foods include 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 red meat, chicken, tuna, salmon, eggs, dried fruits, leafy green vegetables, and whole grains.

**Protein:** Protein can help build your child's muscles, along with regular training and exercise. But there's no need to overload on protein because too much of it can lead to dehydration and calcium loss. Protein-rich foods include fish, lean red meat and poultry, dairy products, nuts, soy products, and peanut butter.

**Carbohydrates:** Carbohydrates provide energy for the body. Some diet plans have urged weight-conscious adults to steer clear of carbohydrates or "carbs" as they're often called. But for a young athlete, carbohydrates are an important source of fuel. There's not any need for your child to do

any "carb loading" or eat a lot of carbs in advance of a big game, but without some of these foods in your child's diet, he or she will be running on empty. When you're choosing carbohydrates, look for whole-grain foods that are less processed and high in fiber, like pasta, brown rice, whole-grain bread, and cereal. Fiber helps lower cholesterol and may help prevent diabetes and heart disease.

It's a good idea to pack your child's meals with natural foods as much as possible. Natural foods such as whole-wheat breads and baked potatoes are more wholesome choices than heavily processed foods, like white breads and potato chips. Usually the less processed the food, the more nutritious it is. Choose products with ingredients such as whole wheat or oats rather than white flour. Encourage your child to pick up a piece of fruit, rather than a fruit drink, which may have added sugar. Remember that sugar may be listed by another name such as sucrose or fructose.

### **Drink Up!**

It's important for young athletes to drink plenty of fluid to avoid any heat illness and dehydration, which can zap a child's strength, energy, and coordination and lead to other health problems.

It's a good idea for your child to drink water or other fluids throughout the day, but especially before, during, and after periods of extended physical activity. Experts recommend that kids drink approximately 1 cup (240 milliliters) of water or fluid every 20 to 30 minutes of physical activity, depending on the child. Shorter competitions may not require drinking during the activity, but it's important to drink water after the game or event to restore whatever fluid your child lost through sweat during the event.

Children often don't recognize or respond to feelings of thirst. So it's a good idea to encourage your child to drink before thirst sets in.

Although many sports drinks are available, usually plain water is sufficient to keep kids hydrated. Sports drinks are designed to provide energy and replace electrolytes - such as sodium and potassium - that athletes lose in sweat. But your child's body typically has enough carbohydrates to serve as energy for up to 90 minutes of exercise. And in most cases, any lost electrolytes can be replenished by a good meal after the activity.

If your child participates in endurance sports such as long-distance running and biking or high-intensity exercise such as soccer, basketball, or hockey, it's a good idea for your child to replenish his or her body throughout the event. This is because the body can use the sugar immediately as energy to make up for the depleted energy stores in the body. Soda and juice may not quench your child's fluid needs as well because many of them have too much sugar and can upset the stomach. If your child wants juice, it's a good idea to mix it with water to reduce the concentration of sugar.

### **Pressures Facing Athletes**

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

Unhealthy eating habits, like crash dieting, can also leave your child with less strength, endurance, and poorer mental concentration. Similar performance issues can come up when kids try to increase their weight too fast. When a person overeats, the food the body can't immediately use gets stored as fat. As a result, kids who overeat may gain weight, but their physical fitness will be diminished.

If you are concerned about your child's eating habits, it's a good idea to talk to your child's doctor.

## **Game Day**

It's important for your child to eat well on game days, but make sure your child eats at least 2 hours before the event - early enough to digest the food before game time. The meal itself should not be very different from what your child has been eating throughout training.

It should have plenty of carbohydrates and protein and be low in fat because fat is harder to digest and can cause an upset stomach.

After the game or event, it's a good idea to make sure your child gets a well-balanced meal. Your child's body will be rebuilding muscle tissue and restoring carbohydrates and fluids for up to 24 hours after the competition. So it's important that your child get plenty of protein, fat, and carbohydrates in the postgame hours.

And remember, when packing your child's bag for the big day, don't forget the water bottle or the sports drink.

## **Meal and Snack Suggestions**

You can't make up for a poor diet on game day, so it's important to feed your child healthy meals and snacks on a consistent basis, even during the off-season. That will provide a solid foundation whenever your child heads out for a competition.

Breakfast might include low-fat yogurt with some granola or a banana. Lunch might include bean burritos with low-fat cheese, lettuce, and tomatoes. A turkey sandwich and fruit may also be a hit. Dinner might be grilled chicken breasts with steamed rice and vegetables or pasta with red sauce and lean ground beef, along with a salad. Snacks might be pretzels, raisins, and fruit.