

Feeding Your Young Athlete

A well-balanced and nutritious diet is important for young athletes. It supports growing bodies, keeps them healthy, and gives them the fuel to perform their best. Eating healthfully now sets the stage for healthy food intake as young adults and adults. For young athletes, it is especially important to get the right amount, and the right kinds, of foods.

When should kids in sports eat?

Active, healthy kids should ideally eat 3 small, balanced meals and eat healthy snacks between meals each day. This approach helps kids maintain their energy without overeating and experiencing unhealthy swings in extreme hunger and fullness.

With a busy schedule shuttling kids between events and having events occur during dinner, it is often easy to grab a quick meal, which can be unhealthy. It can be hard to balance a busy schedule on game day so plan ahead. It is important for your child to have enough food fuel for performance but this does not necessarily need to be a big meal. If a game occurs during dinner be sure they have an afternoon snack like a sandwich with lean meats, grapes, and water. Remember they will need to refuel afterwards, too.

What should kids in sports eat?

Young athletes need the same nutrients as everyone else, but it's even more important for them because they are challenging their bodies for high performance.

1. Whole grains

Whole grains are the primary energy fuel for your child before events and are needed to replenish energy stores afterwards. They provide healthy, long-lasting energy. Best sources are whole grain breads, pastas and crackers, brown rice, and oatmeal.

Stay away from packaged and fast food like chips, pizza and French fries. These foods contain processed grains that will weigh you down, are digested too quickly and will lead to an energy spike and a crash later.

2. Lean proteins

Protein helps with muscle growth and repair and helps control spikes in blood sugar. Aim for poultry, pork, fish and beans as the main protein sources. Red meat is a good source, too, but try to choose lean cuts and limit to two times a week!

3. Healthy fats

Fat is important in everyone's meal plan. The type of fat is more important than the amount of fat. Healthy fats are in olive and canola oils, baked fish, guacamole, peanut butter, nuts and seeds.

Limit butter, whole milk, and most fast food. Kids should have red meat no more than two times each week. Go easy on cheese. All of these have too much of the wrong kind of fat, called saturated fat; too much of which can cause heart disease.

4. Fruits and non-fried vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are packed with nutrients and fiber! Try to have at least one fruit or vegetable at every meal and snack. When selecting fruits and vegetables, choose a variety and go for bright or deep colors. Get creative and consider those that are easy to eat on the go.

Fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruits and vegetables are all good choices! Choose canned fruits that are in light syrup or their own juice. Avoid added sugar and salt.

5. H₂O – stay hydrated!

Your child should never be thirsty – this is a sign of dehydration. The best fluid is plain, unflavored water. They should drink frequently before, during and after an event. Sports drinks are designed for hydrating after heavy continuous exercise lasting more than 1 hour. Most kids do not need the extra sugar and sodium in sports and energy drinks. Avoid energy drinks!

6. Vitamins and minerals

Aim to get enough vitamins and minerals from foods! Many athletes struggle to get enough calcium and iron in their diets, especially females and endurance athletes. **Calcium** supports growing bones and helps prevent injury. Vitamins and minerals should come from food and do not need to be included in flavored or enhanced water. Best sources are low-fat dairy products, dark leafy green vegetables and beans. **Iron** is important for muscle function and repair. Best sources are meat, dried beans, iron-fortified cereals and whole grains.

Limit sodium. Most kids get far more sodium in their diet than they need. Limit foods containing sodium, including deli meats, salty snacks like chips and most fast food.

Young athletes need a healthy balanced diet. Feed your athlete's body what it needs!