

Tips and Strategies to Help Youngsters Eat Better

The most efficient way to judge whether a young athlete is consuming enough high-quality food is to monitor weight, growth, and above all, energy level. Doing so, of course, will require some degree of diligence on the part of parents, youth coaches, and family physicians. However, it is a far better approach than trying to follow, preconceived, so-called scientific recommendations, which only deal with the “average” child (as if there is such a thing).

Many Young Athletes Don't Eat Enough

A large number of young athletes, especially young female athletes, don't eat enough. With all the talk of youth obesity currently circulating throughout the news media, this may come as a surprise to some, but focused studies seem to confirm it.

Calorie expenditure by youngsters during athletic activities (participating in various sports, engaging in strength and conditioning ‘training, working on developing skills, etc.) is also underestimated, sometimes by as much as 25 percent or more. In fact, recent research has shown that among the majority of young sports competitors, energy intake (food consumption) appeared to be lower than energy expenditure. Even a more alarming aspect of this research is that a large percentage of young female team sport athletes were found to be trying to lose weight unnecessarily during their competitive seasons. Significant weight loss over the course of a competitive sports season will usually lead to decreases in performance.

It must be clearly understood by anyone involved in youth sports that the overwhelming majority of dedicated young athletes are extremely active on a year-round basis. Combine this with the fact that their bodies are growing rapidly, and the need for substantial calories is exceedingly necessary.

Weight Gain

In order to gain weight in a safe and efficient manner, young athletes should focus on two factors. First, more high-quality calories (short on junk food, long on lean protein and complex carbohydrates) must be taken in than expended. And second, a year-round strength training program which focuses on building maximum amounts of muscle mass should be undertaken. This approach will ensure that the additional weight comes in the form of lean muscle tissue and not unwanted, performance inhibiting fat.

Youngsters and those who guide them should always keep in mind that being in a weight-gaining mode doesn't mean eating anything and everything in one's path. Fat consumption should still remain moderate, and overindulging in starchy carbohydrates is strongly discouraged. Small amounts of additional muscle-building protein can and should be added to a youngster's diet during a weight-gaining cycle. Limits do exist however. The body can only metabolize (use) 20 to 30 grams of protein in any given three- to four-hour time period. As such, the best way to maximize protein intake is to incorporate five or six small, protein rich meals spread equally throughout the day.

Weight Loss

For young athletes wishing to lose weight, the first point of emphasis is that the scale should never be the ultimate judge. As mentioned previously every individual youngster has a unique build, and actual weight is not nearly as important as body composition (relative amounts of muscle, bone, and fat in the body). Overweight youngsters should always make losing body fat and gaining lean muscle tissue their priority. Since muscle weighs more than fat, what a young athlete weighs is far less important than how it is distributed throughout the body. The majority of top-Level athletes would be considered overweight by American medical body weight charts. As such, these charts mean nothing to competitive young athletes and should be ignored.

Numerous strategies can be implemented to lose weight and improve body composition ratios. Some of the most time-tested strategies are as follows:

- Eat five to six smaller meals per day as opposed to the traditional three larger ones.
- Avoid eating heavy, calorie-laden foods late at night before retiring.
- Eat high-fiber, reasonably low-fat meals regularly.
- Moderate intake of starchy carbohydrates (such as whipped potatoes, non-whole wheat pastas, and white breads).
- Get the majority of protein from low-fat sources (such as fish, lean meats, egg whites, poultry, and skim milk).
- Avoid fried foods.
- Keep away from empty calories (calories without any nutritional value) such as soft drinks and sugary Snacks.
- Drink ample amounts of fresh water in order to flush the system.
- Engage in some form of regular aerobic exercise.
- Strength train consistently. Building lean muscle tissue will help youngsters burn fat more efficiently.
- Stay clear of fad diets and diet pills/potions, These never work in the long run and often cause health problems.

Meals for Competitions and Workouts

Pre-Competition/Workout Meal

Not so long ago, pre-competition meals for athletes usually consisted of a 12-ounce, well-done steak, or some other high-fat meat, a baked potato, piled high with butter and/or sour cream, and a small serving of some type of vegetable. Eating a high-protein, high-fat pre-competition meal was a tradition that stood for decades in sports circles.

Finally, after years of research (and numerous complaints of stomach cramps from athletes), the sports nutrition community has come to its senses. They've learned that fatty, protein rich foods are difficult to digest, thus causing energy depletion in the body stomach discomfort; and lethargy - not exactly what athletes are looking for prior to a competition, team practice, or conditioning workout.

A pre-competition or pre-workout meal for young athletes should always include ample portions of complex carbohydrates, very little protein and fat, and large amounts of hydrating liquids. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, complex carbohydrates such as

pastas, pancakes, and rice are easily digested and, when broken down in the body, produce glucose, which supplies the body's energy needs. Before intense exertion (such as a conditioning workout, basketball game, or soccer match) having large amounts of energy available is obviously crucial to success.

Pre-competition and pre-workout meals should be planned three to three-and-a-half hours before the scheduled activity. However, since metabolism speed in youngsters vary; individual needs should be taken into consideration when establishing pre-activity meal times. For instance, some young athletes may, in addition to their pre-competition/workout meal, require a small, easily digestible snack such as an energy bar or a few rice cakes within an hour or so of a competition or workout to perform at their best. While others, because of their slower digestive systems, are best served pushing the pre-competition/workout meal out to four hours before scheduled high-intensity exertion.

Snacks During Competition/Workouts

Anyone who even casually follows golf on television has seen Tiger Woods munching on a banana or energy bar at some point during his eighteen-hole walk. This activity is no coincidence. Not only is Mr. Woods perhaps the most talented golfer ever to swing a club, but also among the most intelligent and conscientious when it comes to nutrition. Maintaining energy by light snacking during breaks in competition is highly recommended for all young athletes who engage in time consuming sporting events such as tennis matches, football games, or decathlon competitions. This strategy, which should be implemented during long workouts as well, will help to keep glycogen stores high, allowing concentration to remain sharp and physical capabilities steady. Some of the best sources of in-competition snack foods include fresh fruit, sports drinks, energy bars, and graham crackers.

Post-Competition/Post-Workout Eating

Eating after a hard-fought sports competition or an energy-draining conditioning session is a two-fold endeavor. First, 15 to 20 minutes after physical activity concludes, eating a combination protein/carbohydrate snack such as a banana spread lightly with peanut butter or a medium-sized container of yogurt is suggested. Doing so will help replenish glycogen stores in the muscles and enable youngsters to begin the important physical recovery process immediately and efficiently. Keep in mind, however, that many young athletes, especially those who've just participated in an endurance event or workout, may not be hungry (aerobic training tends to suppress the appetite for a time after exercise). Notwithstanding lack of hunger, the "recovery snack" should under no circumstances be neglected. No exceptions.

Second, approximately two hours after the aforementioned "recovery snack," a normal, well-balanced meal similar to those detailed at the end of the handout should be consumed. While the "recovery snack" is an important part of the recovery process, it should never take the place of a solid, nutritionally sound post-competition/workout meal. No exceptions here as well.

Help Youngsters Eat Better

Parents should stay involved. While youth coaches, trainers, and program directors can regularly encourage young athletes to eat in a healthy manner parents are on the front line when it comes to a youngster's food choices. They will be the ones preparing the home-cooked meals, packing the brown bag lunches, stocking the refrigerators, and deciding which restaurants to patronize. It therefore goes without saying that parents will and should take an extremely active role in their child's eating habits.

Learn a youngster's food tastes. Sports nutrition can be a somewhat perplexing topic. One thing about it, however, is for sure: regardless of how healthy or energy promoting a food choice is, if a young athlete doesn't like the taste, all the prodding in the world won't get him to eat it. As such, meal plans should always be developed in tune with a youngster's food tastes. The good news here is that most children are partial to a variety of healthy foods. Building meals around such foods is highly recommended.

Strongly emphasize the connection between sound nutrition and high performance. All dedicated young athletes aspire to perform at their best. In fact, success in the sports arena may very well be their priority in life during this time. Youth coaches, fitness trainers, program directors, and parents should constantly remind youngsters that adhering to healthy eating principles is one of the most important (and controllable) factors related to athletic success. Once this diet/performance connection is established in a young person's mind, conscientious eating will more often than not be the result.

Keep healthy foods around. In addition to preparing healthy meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, parents should try to make nutritious foods easily accessible around the house. For instance, put together plates and/or bowls of carrot sticks, pineapple slices, nuts, and whole wheat crackers and place them at convenient locations in the kitchen, den, living room, and so on. Most youngsters, especially rushed teenagers, will grab whatever is in front of them for a snack. So why not make the choices as healthy as possible?

Get them interested. Similar to most large subjects, nutrition can be very interesting. Getting youngsters interested and involved in what they put in their mouths is perhaps the best way of ensuring that a sound nutritional program is maintained over the long term. Individuals who work regularly with young athletes, and especially parents should do all they can to peek this interest in diet. Pick up some simple, easy-to-read sports nutrition books and place them conveniently around the house or workout area, find out what a youngster's favorite athlete eats regularly (as long as it's healthy, that is) and post a corresponding meal plan on the refrigerator or gym bulletin board, and of course, continue to emphasize the health, performance, and cosmetic benefits of adhering to a proper diet. Igniting curiosity in nutrition will pay great dividends throughout a youngster's athletic career and life.

Periodic junk food snacks are okay. Trying to impose a Spartan diet routine on a youngster is an impossible task, one that is more likely to short circuit a sound nutritional program than it is to engender healthy eating habits. Periodic treats such as cookies, candy bars, and ice cream cones are fine for active young athletes as long as they are consumed infrequently and not used as meal replacements. These "diet breaks" may actually contribute toward youngsters eating better over the long term.

Sample Meal Plans for Young Athletes

Sample meal plans for young athletes. The suggestions are meant to be a basic guide only. What diet plan a youngster ultimately follows will depend on numerous factors, including, but not limited to, food tastes, age, metabolism speed, individual goals, activity level, and health variables.

Sample pre-competition meal (afternoon competition)

- Three-quarter cup of oatmeal with sliced half banana and three ounces of 1% milk.
- Four medium-sized whole wheat pancakes with maple syrup
- 12-ounce glass of orange juice
- 12-ounce glass of water

Sample pre-competition meal (night competition)

- Large bowl of whole wheat pasta (approximately five ounces) with marinara sauce
- Large mixed salad with low-fat dressing
- Half a banana with peanut butter
- 12-ounce glass of Gatorade
- 12-ounce glass of water

#1 - Sample daily meal plan for young athletes

Breakfast:

- Three-egg (two yolks) western omelet
- Two slices of dry whole wheat or whole grain bread
- One-half cup bowl of oatmeal with raisins and three ounces of 2% milk
- 12-ounce glass of grapefruit juice
- 12-ounce glass of water

Lunch:

- Large turkey sandwich on rye bread with lettuce, tomato and mustard
- Medium-sized bowl of vegetable soup
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water

Mid-Afternoon Snack:

- Five whole wheat crackers spread with peanut butter
- 12-ounce glass of apple juice

Dinner:

- Large piece of grilled fish (salmon, tuna, halibut, or swordfish)
- Baked potato with low-fat sour cream
- Medium mixed salad with Italian dressing
- Small slice of pound cake
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water

#2 - Sample daily meal plan for young athletes

Breakfast:

- Two poached eggs on one large slice of whole wheat or whole grain bread
- Medium-sized bowl of cold cereal (Cheerios, Total, or Special K) with
- 1% milk
- 12-ounce glass of grape juice
- 12-ounce glass of water

Lunch:

- Large chef salad with Italian dressing
- Medium-sized whole wheat roll (dry)
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water
- Dinner: 12-ounce cut of lean beef
- Small servings of broccoli and cauliflower
- 3—ounce bowl of whole wheat pasta with olive oil dressing
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water

P.M. Snack:

- One slice of pound cake with strawberries
- 12-ounce glass of 2% milk

#3 – Sample daily meal plan for young athletes

Breakfast:

- Four scrambled eggs (two yolks) with two slices of pumpernickel toast
- One-half cup of oatmeal with two tablespoons of wheat germ
- 12-ounce glass of orange juice
- 12-ounce glass of water

Lunch:

- Two medium-sized chicken breasts
- One-cup serving of brown rice
- Medium serving of grilled vegetables
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water

Mid-Afternoon Snack:

- Medium serving of mixed nuts with dried fruit
- 12-ounce glass of water

Dinner:

- 6-ounce bowl of whole wheat pasta with shrimp topped with marinara sauce
- Medium-sized mixed salad topped with hard cheese slices and Italian dressing
- Small container of low-fat yogurt
- Two 12-ounce glasses of water