

Sports Shorts

Nutrition for Athletes with Dietary Restrictions

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Athletes are always looking for an edge to put them ahead of the competition. Young athletes train long hours to optimize their performance, but often fail to recognize the role proper nutrition plays within their workout plan. Additional benefits of a healthy eating plan include injury prevention, muscle recovery, improved energy levels, and increased attention span.

Some athletes take to fad diets, plant based alternatives, food group elimination, or pyramid schemes as their “answer” for improved performance. For athletes with food allergies and intolerances, concern arises for hindered performance. Regardless of whether your athlete has a medical condition or has electively opted to implement an alternative diet, healthy eating has to be a priority. Emphasizing food as fuel and healthy eating habits will help them run faster, build stronger muscles, and have more energy to play longer.

Is my young athlete at risk if they have a food allergy or restriction?

This is a valid concern and answers may vary based on the unique needs for every athlete. Generally most athletes should be able to consume a balanced diet despite their dietary preferences or restrictions. Empower your athlete with the following strategies to help them eat a wide variety of foods within their limitations:

- Actively engage them in meal and snack preparation! Children and adolescents are more likely to eat food they prepared with less fear or reservation.
- Explore new foods together as a family. Try taking a cooking class and discover fresh techniques to prepare different foods!

- Connect with another family experiencing the same dietary challenges. Food allergy families learn many tips and tricks along their journey!
- Compared to children who do not have a medical condition, children with food allergy are twice as likely to be bullied. Make sure your team meals and snacks are either across the board allergy friendly or you are not drawing too much attention to athletes with a severe allergy, intolerance, or restriction.

What is a healthy meal or snack made up of?

Carbohydrates and protein should be the center of your meals and snacks surrounding competition and practice. A meal or snack that is high in fat, such as food items that are fried or covered in creamy sauces, should be avoided immediately before exercise. Food items high in fat take a long time to digest and could potentially upset your young athlete's stomach before their competition. It is also very important for athletes to eat on a regular schedule especially on days with multiple games and weekend tournaments. You want to avoid the “something is better than nothing” mentality at all cost.

How do we make things work on the road when traveling?

Many athletes with dietary restrictions and food allergies have a difficult time exploring new foods, restaurants, and allowing others to cook for them. Unfortunately, meal and snack planning in preparation for home and away competition is often sidelined due to hectic family schedules. However, doing so will help create peace of mind for athletes and families alike. Here are some strategies to help:

- Help your young athlete see and feel the changes in their performance when they fuel using healthful choices and proper meal timing strategies—especially when they are tempted to skip fueling opportunities in a new environment.
- Pack a cooler and totes with a wide variety of meal & snack options.
- If you have to go through the drive thru, look at the menu ahead of time. This will ideally help alleviate fear with making a wrong choice or the risk of not eating at all.

What are my next steps?

- Regardless of dietary preferences or restrictions, try to focus on real food first instead of supplements or sports fuels.
- Make sure diet modifications can fit into your lifestyle as a family. Consider the reasons you are changing and make certain you are seeking expert advice versus general information found online.
- If your athlete is experiencing low energy, syncopal episodes, weight loss, or shakiness they might be under fueling for their level of activity. Schedule an appointment with your pediatrician or sports dietitian in your area at <https://www.scandpg.org/search-rd/>.

