

SPORTS NUTRITION-WHAT TO EAT BEFORE GAMES AND PRACTICES

How times has this happened to you? Practice is at 6pm, your son or daughter has just completed their homework, you're driving them to practice, and they haven't yet eaten anything. Probably more often than we would like. As a coach, there's nothing quite like the site of an athlete wolfing down the remains of a Big Mac as practice is about to begin.

Armed with a little bit of nutritional knowledge and planning, you can actually use nutrition to help your son or daughter compete or practice with more energy and effort.

Carbohydrates are the foods that fuel muscles. This is the food group that is utilized when the large muscles of the body are involved in physical activity. Proteins and fats are essential to the physical development of our young athletes, but provide no direct energy for exercise or athletics. Carbohydrates are stored in muscles in the form of glycogen, which can remain in the muscles for 12-24 hours.

Carbohydrates are easily digestible compared to proteins and fats that can sometimes take 12 hours to be completely digested, especially in growing children. This is why one can feel so lethargic after eating a meal high in protein and fat; these foods become an energy drain in the sense that it takes much metabolic effort to digest these foods. This is energy that could otherwise be used for exercising muscles. This is very reason behind the success of the Atkins diet. Because proteins and fats take so long to digest, the appetite is stifled for quite awhile, and people then tend to eat less. Carbohydrates also carry quite a bit of water and this is another reason elimination of carbohydrates in the Atkins diet works initially-if you eliminate carbohydrates, you eliminate the excess water weight as well. This type of low carbohydrate diet is the *last* thing that should be done for an exercising athlete. There is simply no carbohydrate to fuel the muscles. While it is true that fat can be broken down to provide energy, the athlete fatigues easily and fat is difficult to utilize for start and stop activities like basketball, football, volleyball, and even soccer.

Examples of carbohydrates are well known to our young athletes. They have learned the food pyramid and know this food group includes breads, cereals, pasta, grains, fruits and juices, dairy products such as milk and yogurt, and sports drinks.

When contemplating what to feed your young athlete before practice or a game, their meal should be mainly carbohydrates. Kids all have different eating patterns. Some may not want to eat at all before practice. You can

remedy this by having them eat a bigger lunch or breakfast and having them take sports drinks to practice and provide a well-balanced meal after practice or games. The best time to eat a pre-game or pre-practice meal should be 1-3 hours before competition depending on how much the athlete eats. A bagel or muffin with some peanut butter and jelly about 1-3 hours before practice will get most athletes through practices and games. Avoid a large amount of high fat and protein snacks in the hours before competition- it won't provide much energy and may actually make the athlete feel tired. A small amount of protein or fat (such as peanut butter) is OK as it can also keep the athlete from getting hungry during practice. Save larger amounts of proteins and fats for after practice or provide some at breakfast and lunch. Other good choices before practice would be cereals, pasta or rice without heavy sauces, fruit and yogurt, granola, honey, jams or jellies on bread or muffins. Give all these foods at least a good hour to digest. Popcorn and pretzels are also good choices as they are high in carbohydrates and have some added salt, which can stimulate thirst-enhancing intake of the most vital nutrient-water. Having kids eat during a homework break after school and before practice is a good idea as it gives food time to digest and also can get them back in focus to complete their homework.

If your not sure about the nutritional content of a given food, the label will provide this information for you in great detail.

What about tournaments and multiple games or competitions on the same day? Most of what is offered at concession stands is pretty high in protein and fat such as hot dogs, candy, and nachos. Good choices for between games are pretzels, popcorn, and sports drinks. If your son or daughter has a favorite snack such as bagels or PB&J, have then bring some along.

If the game is early on Saturday or Sunday, have your son or daughter load up on carbohydrates the night before by feeding them pasta or pizza, especially if they are not big breakfast eaters. A bowl of cereal or juice with toast or a muffin will usually get them through the game.

Save the wings, burgers, fries, dogs, and chicken strips for after the games and avoid high amounts of protein and fat with breakfast for those early morning games. While it is true that soda pop and candy are mostly sugars (which is what carbohydrates are in a more complex form), pop and candy can cause wide fluctuations in blood sugar, also draining and wasting energy that would otherwise be used during practices and games.

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