

## Is nutrition on your team?: Young athletes often don't have the right fuel to succeed

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Certified athletic trainer Phil Hossler turns a colorful yet discouraging phrase when describing what it's like trying to talk to young athletes about the importance of good nutrition for top sports performance.

"It's like trying to empty the ocean with a Dixie cup. You might as well shut the door and talk to the wall," says Hossler, who oversees about 700 sports enthusiasts in the East Brunswick School District. "I can lecture kids for three hours a day and they can leave me and go to McDonald's."

At Southwest Missouri State University, Barbara Bushman's head usually starts spinning when her college jocks talk about how they fuel up for the big game.

"I have the athletes share with me what they eat prior to competition. I am so appalled," says Bushman, an associate dean in health and physical education who teaches a week-long course called "The Athlete's Diet" during semester breaks. Her response to them is typically one of horror. "No! They don't feed you hamburgers the night before, do they?!"

If you're a youngster or teen who's involved in athletics, you need to clean up your nutritional act if you truly want to succeed in your sport. Or, as Hossler likes to say, "if you have no breakfast and a lousy lunch, I don't like the fuel your body is running on for this game."

But, as virtually any kid or adult knows, maintaining a healthful eating regimen, especially if you're busy, is much easier said than done.

"They have continuous training schedules. They skip breakfast, and a lot of them have lunch really early in the school day. Some eat lunch at like 10:30 or 11 a.m. Four or five hours later, they're going to practice or a game and they have nothing in their stomach, so they binge on soda or candy from the cafeteria and they hit this nutrition and energy wall by the end of the day, and they're exhausted," says Kelly Iorillo, a registered dietitian and coordinator for the Obesity and Weight Management Center at the Saint Barnabas Ambulatory Care Center in Livingston. "They've filled up on empty calories, and their body is not getting the nutrients it needs."

Bushman says she believes athletes who don't eat and drink for optimal performance never learned the right way to fuel themselves. "We're not born dietitians," she says.

"The adolescent athlete is still an American. And most Americans don't have a clue," says Hossler. He adds that people usually don't work to improve their lifestyle habits if they basically feel good. "Like all of us, the assumption is that, 'If I can't feel it, it must not be there.' That is, 'If I don't feel tight, I must not be inflexible. If I don't feel run down or sick, I must be eating satisfactorily, and if I am not as fat or as out of shape as that one over there, I must still be all right.'"

If you want to make sure you're giving your body what it needs to perform well in sports, stop thinking of food as a fattening enemy, say health and nutrition experts.

"The thing you need to start emphasizing is food is fuel and, if you don't put the proper fuel in your tank, you won't get the optimal performance out of your body, not just physically but mentally. And it will affect your ability to recover from an exercise session or workout," says Scott Fisher, an exercise physiologist and director of the Fitness Center, on the Teaneck campus of Fairleigh Dickinson University.

What you consume and when you consume it should be your top concerns.

When it comes to pregame eating, forget the myth that protein is more important than carbohydrates.

"Your body doesn't use protein as a main fuel source. It uses carbs," says Kirsten Wagner, exercise physiologist and program manager at the Sports Medicine Institute, based at the Saint Barnabas Ambulatory Care Center. "Your bodies are growing and they need close to 3,000 calories in a day. You should be getting 60 percent of your calories from carbs. But kids don't know what carbs are. They think they're just bread and pasta."

You should be getting your carbs from nutritionally dense, sources such as fruits and vegetables, and whole-grain products, like whole-wheat bread and cereals made from whole grains (look for the word "whole" on the food packaging).

Don't load up on food rich in protein and fat before your game or practice session. High-fat, high-protein foods force your body to work harder to digest them, which robs you of the energy you need for your sports competition or practice, Fisher says.

Instead, choose carbohydrates because carbs are digested quickly and they're readily available for your body to use, which is important if you're going to be doing high-intensity activity, say Iorillo and Bushman.

Again, stay away from refined, sugary, nutrient-poor carbs. Iorillo suggests that, before you hit the playing field, have a light meal or snack of healthier carbs, such as fruit, pretzels, unbuttered popcorn or granola bars.

Ideally, you should eat two to four hours before your sports activity, according to Fisher. "If it's more than four hours, you'll probably have burned up those calories" before your workout, he says. If you eat less than two hours before, he explains, "it's still in your digestive system and you won't make use of it anyhow."

How to fuel yourself during your sports activity depends on how long you plan to be active, Fisher says.

"If the duration is less than an hour, don't worry too much about getting calories. But if it's longer than a couple hours, you're wise to get some calories during that workout or competition." The easiest way to do that, he says, is by consuming a sports drink that can supply your body with some glucose for fuel.

You also need to refuel after a sports event or practice, usually within one to two hours. Fisher says the post-game eating should ideally take place within 30 to 60 minutes. "The body is most receptive at restoring those stocks of carbs at that time. If you wait any longer, your body might not be able to restock as much carbohydrates."

The post-game or post-workout snack should include a carb, Iorillo says, and a protein, as well. Protein will help restore some of the muscles that were used during the sports activity.

"The ideal ratio of carbs to protein is 4 grams of carb to 1 gram of protein," says Fisher. That means, for example, you could eat a bowl of pasta with a glass of skim milk, he adds. Iorillo suggests having an apple (carb) with a dollop of peanut butter (protein).

Don't forget to stay hydrated before, during and after your sports event, say the nutrition experts. Stay away from sugary drinks and soda. Better choices are water and sports drinks. If you want juice, make sure it's 100 percent fruit juice and drink about 4 ounces because fruit juices are high in sugar, says Iorillo.

If the duration of your exercise is going to be longer than an hour, Fisher suggests you drink 6 to 8 ounces of water every 15 to 20 minutes.

Try hard not to skip meals. "I see eating as a time line, and most people eat in a crescendo. Most people eat a light breakfast and a light lunch and a huge evening meal," says Nancy Clark, a sports nutritionist in Massachusetts and author of "Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guide Book" (Human Kinetics, \$18.95).

"It should be even meals, so that as you go through the day, you're evenly fueled."

"If your meals are more than four hours apart," Fisher advises, "you should be having a snack in between -- fruit, yogurt and pretzels, energy bars."

Knowledge about good sports nutrition should not be limited to the young athlete, says Iorillo. Parents and coaches should pitch in, too.

"They have to help with planning meals and snacks so the young athlete will have the variety and types of food they need and at the places and times they meet."

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