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Don't Let Your Young Athlete Make These Nutrition Mistakes

Sports dietitians bust some fueling myths and share their tips to keep active kids feeling their best.

If you have an active child, you know just how busy life can be with added practices, team meetings and planning. Not only do we have to get the kids to practice, but we have to get food on the table, help with homework and meet the needs of other family members as well.



Even though our active kids know they have to feed their bodies, they may have no idea what to eat or when to eat it to maintain performance and their overall health. When we add very influential input from coaches, teachers and peers, there can be a great deal of conflicting advice.

In my almost 20 years working with athletes, I've seen the same issues come up time and time again. Many of my fellow sports dietitians agree and have offered their advice for avoiding these common fueling myths and misconceptions.

- **Myth:** *If they're eating, they'll get all the nutrients they need.*

According to Heather Mangieri, Pittsburgh-based registered dietitian and author of "Fueling Young Athletes," one of the most common mistakes she sees is when an athlete puts more focus on what to eat before, during and after activity than what to eat each day. She warns that "eating a perfectly planned recovery meal will never take the place of meeting daily nutritional needs." This makes a lot of sense considering that nutrient deficiencies don't just happen overnight.

"Deficiencies that could negatively impact sports performance, like deficiencies in iron or Vitamin D, can occur when the athlete fails to get adequate nutrition over time," Mangieri says. "That's why it's so important to incorporate nutrient-rich foods into every day, not just on game day or after training."

Clint Wattenberg, director of sports nutrition for the UFC Performance Institute, calls this attention to eating well throughout a season “proactive fueling.” He suggests that this is a key factor to developing a performance nutrition mindset that practices building nutrition into the foundation of performance. “Inconsistency and reactive fueling leads to a crumbling foundation undermining training adaptation, thus hampering athlete development and ultimately performance,” he says. “The more solid your nutrition foundation, the sturdier, more sustainable and consistent your performance becomes.”

- **Myth:** *Snacking isn't necessary.*

“One of my biggest pet peeves, is when an athlete forgets to fuel up before after-school sports,” says Wendy Sterling, a registered dietitian and team nutritionist for the Oakland Athletics. “Kids may eat lunch at 11:30 and then not eat again until after sports are over at 6 p.m.,” notes Sterling, who is also the co-author of “How to Nourish Your Child Through an Eating Disorder: A Simple, Plate-by-Plate Approach to Rebuilding a Healthy Relationship with Food” and “No Weigh!: A Teen’s Guide to Positive Body Image, Food, and Emotional Wisdom.” “Missing this critical after school pre-workout opportunity leads to tired, sluggish athletes on the field who often can’t get through practice – and if they do get through practice, it’s likely on fumes,” she says. Much like her pro athletes, Sterling tells younger athletes that to elevate their training, they should plan to have an easy-to-digest, pre-workout snack that’s rich in carbohydrates and contains some protein. The amount of food varies based how much time the athlete has to eat, but some of her favorite basic options for after-school fueling include smoothies, yogurt with granola, apple and peanut butter, peanut butter-filled pretzels plus a banana, or half of a sandwich.

- **Myth:** *Drinking water on the way to practice is enough.*

Hydration isn’t just a common discussion in my sport nutrition sessions, it’s a hot topic I broach with all my active clients. Whether I’m working with a recreational athlete or a professional, fluid intake is a key conversation for performance and overall health.

Sterling warns that kids should not expect to make up for poor hydration right before practice starts – by then it’s simply too late. “Chugging too much water before practice won’t sit well in the athlete’s stomach; it can often be felt sloshing around as they move,” Sterling says.

Like fueling well throughout the day, good hydration should start in the morning and continue on from there. Sterling recommends using urine color as one way to assess hydration status, “aiming for a light pale-yellow color, like lemonade, (which) indicates a good level of hydration, whereas a dark concentrated urine, like apple juice color, indicates dehydration.”

Mangieri says that “even with the best intentions, staying hydrated can be a challenge for kids. Some schools do not allow kids to carry water bottles to their classes, so they are relying on trips to the drinking fountain to maintain a healthy hydration status during the day.” She reminds

young athletes to stop and gulp every chance they get. "Six large gulps of water is 6 ounces, so they should try to do that between every class," she says.

When working with teams, Mangieri reminds coaches that they can also help keep young athletes hydrated by encouraging kids to drink fluids often and offering several water breaks throughout practices. "There is no cheaper, simpler or more effective way to help performance and protect health than staying hydrated during exercise," Mangieri says.

- **Myth: Focusing on weight is helpful.**

Time and time again, young athletes tend to focus on things they have little control over. With a dieting culture that's overly focused on weight even though it isn't a behavior, young athletes can impair their health and performance when trying to manipulate their weight.

"Many athletes and coaches mistake body weight and body composition for a controllable variable (especially when attempting to develop performance)," Wattenberg says. He points out that weight and composition are one of many adaptations to training that are a result of a variety of behaviors including training intensity, duration and frequency, as well as nutritional habits, stress, sleep, genetics and an individual's medical or nutrition history. And just like training adaptations, such as strength, speed and endurance, body weight and composition are an adaptation to these stimuli, he says.

Wattenberg, who is very familiar with weight-class sports, warns that young athletes can get into trouble when they (or their coaches) prioritize weight and body composition as a representation of performance. He cautions that when a priority is placed on body weight and composition, those negative weight control behaviors can undermine all other training adaptations and performance. Wattenberg recommends young athletes, parents and coaches instead "focus on behaviors that impact performance and allow body weight and composition to naturally optimize to support performance."

Sports nutrition doesn't have to be complicated. Like most areas of health, fueling young athletes requires planning things like family meals, having fluids on hand, packing snacks, getting enough sleep and allowing for adequate recovery time.

While nutrition is a key factor in growth, development and performance, so is realizing that young athletes can be great without an over-focus on body weight or shape. Fueling young athletes well and teaching them to appreciate the strength of their unique bodies can be a life-long victory.

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