

Basic Nutrition Fact Sheet
Athletes Fuel Up For Fitness

Can nutrition help improve performance?

YES! A balanced eating style with variety and moderation supplies the right amount of nutrients and energy needed for reaching athletic potential.

What does “a balanced eating style” mean to an athlete?

An athlete needs lots of fluids, some fat, moderate protein and plenty of low-fat, high carbohydrate foods on a **daily basis**. The emphasis here has to be **daily**. An athlete must also replenish the fuel and fluids used during practice and competition. An athlete must closely watch his/her nutrition before, during and after exercise.

What exactly are carbohydrates and why should I really care?

Working muscles use carbohydrates as the main energy source. If an athlete wants to obtain that competitive edge, it is important to store up before the day of competition. At least 55-60 % of total calories should be from carbohydrates. There are a variety of foods that would provide this percentage including fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low fat milk.

When is the best time to load up on carbohydrates?

All the time, but muscles are especially hungry just after physical activity. Try to eat or drink 200-400 carbohydrate calories within the first ½ hour after exercise and then again two hours later after stretching, showering and exercise recovery. Here are some examples:

- 1 bagel and a medium orange
- 1 cup pasta topped with ¼ cup steamed vegetables
- ½ cup cereal, ½ sliced banana and 8 oz skim milk
- 1 cup nonfat frozen or regular yogurt with 1 cup blueberries or raspberries
- 1 pita pocket and 1 cup lowfat vegetable soup
- 1 bran muffin with 1 cup vegetable juice

The majority of carbohydrates should come from natural sources in the diet including both simple carbohydrates in fruit and complex carbohydrates in grains. For the busy athlete on the road it's not always easy to eat “a meal”. Juice or a carbohydrate-containing fluid may be a convenient way to replace carbohydrates and lost fluid, especially when you lack an appetite after a hard workout. An 80-120 calorie granola or sports bar can also be a handy snack to have around.

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It is common knowledge that an athlete needs extra protein, right?

An athlete should obtain 12-15% of calories as protein. This translates to about 70 grams per day for the average female athlete and about 80 grams for a male. Most people eat more protein than they need every day. The minimum servings on the Food Guide Pyramid provide 90 grams of protein. The important issue is to eat enough carbohydrates, as they allow protein to be used for muscle growth instead of being used for energy.

Calories, especially from fat, should be limited to maintain a healthy figure.

It is true that children and adolescents are actively growing. Calorie restriction that interferes with this is never okay. While the typical American eats too many calories, it is important to keep in mind that fat has a crucial role in a healthy nutrition plan. It is impossible to have shiny hair and smooth, elastic skin without eating fat. We cannot absorb Vitamins A, D, E and K without fat and it actually helps you to feel satisfied after eating a snack or meal. The average athlete consuming 1800-3000 calories would need at least 50-80 grams of fat per day. It is wise to watch your fat intake and to emphasize healthier fat (i.e., olive and canola oils) but some athletes go overboard and forget the importance of balanced eating.

Nutrition cannot replace genetic ability or a sound training program, but without it, an athlete may have to settle for second best.

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