



# Nutrition Notes

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## Sports Nutrition for Young Athletes

Coaches, parents, and athletes often look for a “miracle food” to enhance performance. The truth is, there are no special foods or supplements that can help athletes train harder or compete better. What does make a difference is the athlete’s overall diet and the timing of meals.

Good nutrition is essential to support an athlete’s growth, strength, and stamina. Parents and coaches can use the following nutrition information to help young athletes feel energetic and perform their best.

### Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating

Young athletes need to eat more calories than less active youth. By choosing a variety of foods from each of the four food groups, they will get enough protein, vitamins, and minerals to support growth, development, and physical activity.

### Food Choices and Timing

Foods eaten before and after practices and games can make a difference in an athlete’s performance. The types of foods that are chosen and the timing of the meals are important.

### Game Day

- Include enough fluid to keep your body well-hydrated (see hydration tips, pg 3).
- A small snack can be eaten within one hour before activity if an athlete feels hungry.
- Eat meals at least two hours before events.
- Choose foods that are familiar and well tolerated before competitive events. New foods can be tried before practice sessions to see what works best.
- Choose foods that are higher in carbohydrates, such as pasta, bread, cereal, rice, fruits, vegetables and low-fat yogurt or milk. Carbohydrate loading is not necessary.
- Avoid eating high-fat foods such as hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, potato chips, donuts and cheese before activity. Higher fat foods take longer to digest and may cause discomfort if eaten too close to the start of a practice or competition.
- Avoid sugary foods, such as pop and chocolate bars, right before the game. They provide a little energy boost but it doesn’t last long and leaves athletes drained.

**Winning Game Day Meals >**

Recommended game day meals are not very different from regular meals. Check out these high-carbohydrate, low-fat suggestions.

**Winning Meals at Home**

- Spaghetti with tomato sauce, garden salad, low fat yogurt
- Roast beef sandwich on whole-grain bun with tomato and lettuce, applesauce, milk
- Grilled chicken, carrots, baked potato, fruit salad
- Chicken stir-fry with vegetables, fruit cup, low-fat milk
- Cereal with banana, whole wheat toast, orange juice

**After the Game** An athlete's body will be rebuilding muscle tissue and restoring carbohydrates and fluids for up to 24 hours. Fuelling up on high carbohydrate foods and beverages soon after an activity replenishes the body and helps it recover. Poor choices after games result in a sluggish performance in future competitions.

**Tournaments** Make sure you eat and drink enough before your game:

- When events are separated by 3 hours or more, a high carbohydrate, low-fat meal can be eaten. See Winning Meals at Home for ideas (pg 1).
- When events are a couple of hours apart, easily digestible high-carbohydrate snacks such as bagels, low-fat yogourt, fruit and fluids are best.
- If there is less than an hour between competitions, a sports drink is appropriate.

### Packable Snacks

Snacks in vending machines and snack booths are often high in fat and sugar. Encourage athletes to make healthier choices. Here are some healthy snacks that are easy to carry in a gym bag:

- banana or oatmeal muffins
- whole-grain crackers, half a bagel or pita bread
- plain cookies such as animal crackers, fig newtons or graham crackers
- fresh fruit such as apples, pears or bananas, dried fruit, or a fruit cup
- individual boxes of whole-grain cereal
- healthier choice granola bars
- pretzels

- trail mix
- juice boxes
- milk-based puddings
- cold foods such as cheese, yogourt, and milk can be packed in an insulated bag with an ice pack.

### Fast Food Choices

Traveling athletes may need to choose foods from restaurant menus. Athletes should follow the same guidelines regarding the timing, amount, and composition of meals. Many fast food and family-style restaurants offer lower fat, higher carbohydrate options.

Choose...	Instead of...
Bagels or low-fat muffins	Donuts or croissants
Grilled chicken sandwich	Burger, deep-fried chicken or fish sandwich
Milk or juice	Pop
Salad (with a little dressing) or baked potato	French fries or onion rings
Pasta with tomato sauce	Pasta with cream sauce
Turkey, grilled chicken, or veggie sub	Meatball or salami sub
Frozen yogourt with fruit	Pies or cake

#### Smart Choices >

There are plenty of options for eating healthy on the road.

## The Importance of Hydration

Fluid replacement is a key part of a winning sports nutrition plan. Unlike adults, young athletes have a harder time cooling their body during activity. This means they have a greater chance of becoming dehydrated.

Dehydration can affect muscle strength, endurance, coordination, and can lead to muscle cramps, exhaustion and heat stroke. Thirst is not a good cue of how much water the body needs. By the time thirst is felt, an athlete is already becoming dehydrated.

Hydration tips for athletes:

- Athletes should carry their own water bottle. It's a healthy reminder to drink up!
- Water is the best source of fluid as the body absorbs it quickly.
- Beverages that contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, energy drinks and cola, should be avoided. Caffeine increases the chances of dehydration.

### Hydration Tips

- Before activity: Athletes should drink 400 – 600 ml of fluid to be fully hydrated.
- During activity: Athletes should drink 150 – 350 ml of fluid every 15 – 20 minutes.
- After activity: Athletes should drink plenty of fluid to replace water lost from sweating.

**The Facts on Sports Drinks** Sports drinks, such as Gatorade and Powerade, are not needed for many minor sports activities. These drinks are made for athletes who have been exercising and sweating intensely for 90 minutes or more. They are high in sugar and acid and can harm teeth, especially if sipped on for long periods of time.

Water is the best drink for athletes at minor sports practices and games. Instead of a sports drink, try water and a carbohydrate-rich snack. Ideas include crackers, a mini pita, chocolate milk or a yogurt tube.

Eating and drinking right will help your athlete play his or her best. Have a great season!

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### Sports Nutrition Reading List

**Canada's Food Guide for Healthy Eating.** For a free copy, contact Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health.

**Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook.** Nancy Clark, Human Kinetics, 1997.

**Play Hard, Eat Right: A Parents' Guide to Sports Nutrition for Children.** Debbie Sowell Jennings, John Wiley & Sons, 1995.

**The Ultimate Sports Nutrition Handbook.** Ellen Coleman and Suzanne Nelson Steen, Bell Publishing Company, 1996.

*Adapted from material produced by Waterloo Region Community Health Department, Toronto Public Health and Sudbury and District Health Unit.*