

The Athlete's Diet

Nutrition Principles

Athletes need to know what to eat and when to eat it. Just because they are getting calories into their system does not mean that they are getting the nutrients that their body needs for optimal performance. Athletes should focus on consuming nutrient-dense carbohydrates as the main source of energy for the body. We also hear a lot of talk about protein consumption. Typically, athletes get enough protein in their diet which means supplements are usually not necessary. They need to eat the right amount of protein in order to repair muscles and tissues. Believe it or not, fat is an essential part of the diet. The challenge is to consume the right kind of fat and the correct amount without overdoing it. As most of you know, hydration is vital for performance. Always plan ahead and keep your body hydrated, if you get low on fluids your athletic performance can be adversely affected. Finally, meal timing/ recovery foods play an important role in performance. Always try to plan ahead!

Carbohydrates

As I mentioned earlier, carbohydrates are the body's most efficient source of fuel. 60-70% of an athlete's total diet should come from carbohydrates. The main objective is to give the body adequate amounts of carbohydrates to utilize for energy, while saving the protein for muscle and tissue repair. Carbohydrates are found in foods like whole grains, pasta, rice, fruits, juices, beans, peas, vegetables, and milk products.

Protein

As previously stated, protein is used to maintain and repair muscle/ tissue. 10-12% of an athlete's total diet should come from protein. On average an athlete should consume 0.5g of protein per pound of bodyweight. Protein is found in foods like lean meats, fish, eggs, milk/milk products, beans, peas, nuts, seeds, and soy foods.

Fat

It is important to have enough fat in the diet for health and performance. Keep in mind that the good fat that you want to be consuming is Polyunsaturated and Monounsaturated. Fat is used as a fuel during long duration events along with carbohydrates and small amounts of protein. Fat provides more than two times the amount of energy than carbohydrates and proteins do. 20-25% of the athlete's total diet should come from fats. Some good sources of fat are canola oil, olive oil, sesame oil, nuts, seeds, fish oil, cottonseed oil, and walnuts.

Hydration

Adequate fluid before, during, and after exercise is necessary for health and optimum performance. There are some guidelines to follow that will help keep an athlete properly hydrated. Athletes should weigh themselves before and after practice. This is done to determine how much weight is lost. For every pound of bodyweight lost, the athlete should consume 1 pint of water. Athletes need to consume a minimum of 16oz of water 1 hour before the game followed by constant sipping of fluids.

Meal Timing

Meal timing plays a very important role in an athlete's diet. Always eat around 800-1,000 calories 4 hours before exercise or competition. Eat a small snack 1-2 hours before exercise or competition, this will be about 200-300 calories. Make sure to eat a small snack 30 minutes after exercise around 200-300 calories. Following exercise eat a meal 1-2 hours after consisting of about 800-1,000 calories.

Recovery Foods

Not eating and drinking after training or competition can have negative consequences on performance. Athletes need to refuel their bodies in order to have the proper energy necessary for training or competition the next day. These foods should be eaten 15-30 minutes post exercise; sports drinks, energy or breakfast bars, bagels with peanut butter, sub sandwiches, crackers/cheese, burritos, fresh fruit, vegetables such as carrots/celery, fruit smoothies, rice cakes, trail mix, chocolate milk, or animal crackers.

Put It All Together

It is obvious that athletic performance does not just come from natural athletic ability, hard work, and time spent on the field, but from the diet as well. It is important to fuel the body with the necessary nutrients required to achieve optimum performance. Have a game plan and stick to it. Combine proper nutrition, hard work, and motivation to an athlete's training program to give you the edge over the competition.

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