

Fueling Your Soccer Player: Nutrition and Hydration
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Fueling your athlete with food and water is no different than fueling your car with gasoline. Without proper nutrition and hydration your athlete may not perform up to their potential. There are two key components to fueling an athlete. The first is the establishment of healthy eating and drinking on a daily basis. This serves as a foundation for game-day nutrition, which will "top off the tank" and help improve performance.

Daily Nutrition and Hydration

Making healthy decisions daily about nutrition and hydration can be challenging. For families with working parents and constant driving between after-school activities, it is not always easy. However, there are several small choices that can make a big difference in the overall nutrition of your family. The first is to limit fast food to once a month. Fast food is loaded with calories and a high percentage of fat and therefore has virtually no nutritious content. Also, consider packing a lunch for your athlete. This will allow you and your child to make healthy dietary choices together.

The second change to make is to limit consumption of soda pop. Pop contains a large amount of sugar, and is also considered "empty" in terms of nutritional content. Caffeinated pop also dehydrates you by increasing your urine production. Instead, replace pop with water. Some kids hate drinking plain water, so flavor it with a lemon or a lime slice. There are no calories in water and it serves an important role in keeping your athlete hydrated. If you already restrict pop and fast food intake, congratulations! You have already made an important decision to teach your child healthy eating habits.

A good daily general nutrition and hydration plan should include the following:

- 2-3 servings of protein: poultry, fish, lean meat, beans, eggs
- 3-4 servings of dairy: milk, yogurt, cheese
- 6-11 servings of grains (ideally whole grains): bread, pasta, rice, cereals
- 4-6 servings of fruits/vegetables: dried, canned, or whole fruit and raw or cooked veggies (dark green veggies are the best)
- 8 tall glasses of water

For a fun way to determine your specific nutritional needs, go to www.mypyramid.gov. Here, you can enter your age, gender, and level of physical activity for a daily nutrition plan to meet your needs. You can also obtain ideas on food choices.

With the busy lifestyle we all lead, it becomes difficult to sit down for a healthy meal three times a day. One easy solution is to eat smaller meals more frequently.

Snacking can be very healthy, as long as it includes the right food. Packing a piece of fruit, crackers with peanut butter, or even a yogurt can help you get closer to meeting your daily nutritional goals. Also, carrying around a water bottle or even just drinking through a straw can help increase your intake.

Game-day Nutrition and Hydration

Game-day eating and drinking is the critical component to energizing athletes through their competition. General daily nutrition serves as your foundation which your game-day choices will build upon. The key to game-day nutrition is to eat healthy foods at the right time. Never eat a large meal within 4 hours of a competition. If you have an early afternoon game, get up and eat a large breakfast with carbohydrates and protein (i.e. whole wheat toast with eggs and some fresh fruit). Then one hour before game time, eat a small snack. This snack should hold you over through competition. Good choices include a small serving of oatmeal, a banana or apple, yogurt, graham crackers, sports bars, Fig Newtons, or half a bagel with small amount of cream cheese. If you have an evening game, eat a solid breakfast and lunch, then one hour before game time, get your snack in. After the game, make sure you also have a snack handy to hold you over until you can get home for a nutritious dinner. Ideally, this meal should be consumed with two hours to replace what the athlete has burned.

Game-day hydration is critical to performance. Water is still your best friend. Avoid caffeinated beverages (pop, Red Bull, coffee) because they will dehydrate you and possibly hurt your performance. Some people like to drink sports drinks (Gatorade, Powerade, Allsport) for the taste. These drinks contain carbohydrates and electrolytes that are meant to replace what you lose in sweat. They are not necessary if you are exercising for less than 60 minutes. Water adequately replaces sweat losses in athletes working out for less than 60 minutes. If you do workout for greater than 60 minutes, consume the sports drinks during and after competition. Consider mixing them with water to dilute them. If you choose to drink sport drinks remember that each 16 oz. bottle contains around 125 calories.

Our thirst mechanism isn't activated until we are 3% dehydrated. At this level, our performance decreases. So, it is crucial to drink before you get thirsty. Hydration guidelines for adults and adolescents suggest the following intake:

- 2 tall glasses of water 3 hours before sports
- 1 tall glass of water 10 minutes before a game
- 1 tall glass of water every break from the ice (or every 15-20 minutes)
- 3 tall glasses of water immediately following the game

(One tall glass = 8 oz)

Learning proper nutrition and hydration will not only improve your performance on the ice, but also off. For more information, consider visiting