

FUELING THE YOUNG ATHLETE



Hockey, gymnastics, and soccer are but a few of the endless structured sport options for active children and adolescents. Participation in recreational or competitive sports at a young age helps develop skills, confidence, good health, and fitness, as well as helping to reduce chances of obesity and obesity-related health concerns.

Childhood and adolescence are critical periods for physical growth and development. While sport is healthful in so many ways, it's vital that young athletes consume enough dietary fuel for these extra energy demands. Furthermore, the timing of meals and/or snacks can be a challenge when active children are trying to schedule schooling, homework, plus physical training and competitive sessions. In addition, active children may be at greater risk than adults for exercise-induced dehydration. With careful planning athletic youngsters can learn to incorporate sound nutrition to meet these unique dietary demands. (Check out "[Nutrition For Child And Adolescent Athletes](#)", Sport Science Exchange #77 Volume 13 (2000), Number 2 from the Gatorade Sports Science Institute for more information).

A young athlete should strive towards consuming:

- Sufficient food energy (i.e. Calories) to support exercise needs, physical growth and development
- A high carbohydrate diet, since carbohydrate is the primary fuel source for all sports
- Ample protein to build and repair body tissues as well as support physical growth and development
- A moderate to low-fat diet to ensure readily available Calories from carbohydrates and lean proteins
- Loads of liquids required for all bodily functions and to prevent hyperthermia
- A varied diet to provide all essential vitamin and mineral needs
- Frequent meals and snacks to sustain optimal energy levels (Check out Gatorade Sports Science Institute "[Research Proves It – A High Carbohydrate Diet is Essential](#)" for more information.)

AMPLE ENERGY

Active children may need 500 to 1500 or more Calories more each day than their inactive peers. One way to meet this extra energy demand is to eat three meals and three or four snacks each day. And in some cases active youngsters may even need to divide their meals before and after training, rather than enjoying a complete "traditional" meal; as is often the case with early morning swimmers and after school gymnasts. However, throughout the course of the day the equivalent of three nutritionally balanced meals, along with three or four healthy snacks should be consumed.

Packing portable nutritious snacks and fluids into the training bag should be a habitual practice of every young athlete to maximize training and competition sessions. Occasional tracking of an athlete's diet is an effective way to assess their overall eating habits and shortcomings. (Check out Gatorade Sports Science Institute "[Recovery Nutrition for High School Athletes](#)" for more information).

HEALTHY CHOICES

Eating well is key to support every athlete's training program, including youth. When striving for personal best sport performances and good health, active children may need encouragement to eat wholesome foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (e.g. brown rice, whole wheat pasta, whole grain breads, etc.).

Involving children in the process of menu planning, food selection, and meal preparation may increase the likelihood that they consume a nutritionally sound and varied diet. Consider the following nutritious menu examples:

BALANCED BREAKFASTS	LOADED LUNCHES	DESIGNER DINNERS	SUPERIOR SNACKS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Scrambled Egg, Toast, Strawberries, Milk ✓ Peanut Butter or Cheese, Bagel, Banana, Vegetable Juice ✓ Whole Grain Cereal, Milk, Blueberries, & Lean Ham or Turkey Bacon, Water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Whole Wheat Pita Sandwich with Turkey & Vegetables, Carrot Sticks, Milk & Granola Bar ✓ Multigrain Crackers, Sliced Cheese, Apple, Oatmeal Cookies, Milk or Juice ✓ Roast Beef Whole Wheat Sub, Fruit Salad, Yogurt, Fig Cookies, Juice or Water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Whole Wheat Spaghetti with Meat Sauce, Salad, Milk & Fruit Cobbler ✓ Roast Chicken, Baked Potato, Steamed Vegetables & Rice Pudding, Milk or Juice ✓ Stir-Fry Vegetables with Meat, Poultry or Tofu, Steamed Brown Rice & Angel Food Cake with Fruit, Milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cheese & Crackers ✓ Trail Mix ✓ Yogurt & Granola ✓ Applesauce & Low-Fat Muffin ✓ 1/2 to Full Sandwich ✓ Banana or Corn Bread ✓ Veggies & Dip ✓ Homemade Pita Pizzas

MONITOR GROWTH

To ensure your active youngster is eating enough Calories (or energy) check their weight once a month or at least every few months. If an active child or adolescent fails to gain weight for several months it's possible that they are using too much energy exercising and have not been eating enough. A consultation with a dietitian and/or physician may also be necessary. (Check out "[Nutrition For Child And Adolescent Athletes](#)", Sport Science Exchange #77 Volume 13 (2000), Number 2 from the Gatorade Sports Science Institute for more information).

FORGETTING FLUIDS?

Consuming sufficient fluids is a common dietary challenge, especially for active children. They have a poor sense of thirst and often need to be reminded to drink. Children also sweat less than adults and therefore can easily over-heat. Sweating is how we cool off. Water is the best thirst quencher, however, many children will drink more when their beverage is flavoured. Regular sips of a sports drink or unsweetened, diluted juice during exercise may ensure young athletes are drinking sufficiently. (Check out Gatorade Sports Science Institute "[Kids and Hydration: Selecting Beverages for Active Kids](#)" for more information).

Being active in recreational and competitive sports helps children and teens develop lifelong healthy habits. Good nutrition not only supports physical activity, but it also enhances health and sport performances. Contact the Coaching Association of Canada for more information about how to find a [sport dietitian/nutritionist](#) to work with young and "older" athlete(s).

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