



## **Feeding Young Athletes**

Nutrition plays a key role in your child's growth, development, and athletic performance. Whether a child is training for a big race or simply playing a game of catch with friends, proper nutrition can greatly impact his or her athletic performance. Unfortunately, many children develop poor eating habits at a young age. Skipping breakfast, choosing the same foods day after day, and eating high-calorie, low nutrient-dense foods are all common practices among today's youth.

It is important to acknowledge that children have special nutritional needs. They are not simply miniature adults. Instead, they are growing and developing and require adequate nutrition to do so.

### **Basic Nutrition Guidelines**

A young athlete should eat a diet that:

- Provides adequate calories
- Is high in nutrient-dense complex carbohydrates
- Is low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol
- Has a moderate amount of protein.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Guide Pyramid provides an excellent visual guide to assist in meal planning. It is important to include a variety of foods from all of the food groups in order to provide well-balanced, healthy meals. The Food Guide Pyramid encourages variety, moderation, and balance in meals.

As a parent, try to offer a variety of different foods. No one food item can provide all of the essential nutrients your child needs to thrive. Try to choose foods from each of the food groups as well as different foods within each group. Remember, moderation is also important. When a child eats too much of any single food or nutrient, it's hard to provide the balanced nutrition he or she needs to properly grow and develop.

## **Pre-Game Nutrition**

Proper pre-game meals/snacks are especially important if a young athlete is going to be participating in an activity that will last longer than an hour. A good pre-game meal can help provide energy to working muscles. It can also help prevent fatigue, which can hurt athletic performance.

### **When?**

Try to eat one to four hours prior to training or competition to leave enough time for the stomach to empty. If a child eats too closely to exercising, his or her body will be focused on digesting food and will not perform at their optimum level. The body needs time to transform food into energy that the muscles can use. Exercising on a full stomach can cause nausea, vomiting and indigestion.

### **How Much?**

The size of the meal depends on the time of the meal in relation to the athletic event. The closer to the event, the smaller the meal should be. For example: four hours before exercise a child can eat a large meal, 700-800 calories. But one hour before exercise, the meal should be limited to 300-400 calories. The meal size may need to be adjusted, depending on what the child can tolerate.

### **What to Eat?**

Now is not the time to experiment. Provide carbohydrate-dense foods the child has eaten in the past and has tolerated well. Carbohydrate-dense foods provide the quickest and most efficient energy source and are easily digested. The pre-game meal should consist mostly of whole grains (cereal, rice, pasta and/or breads) along with a fruit or vegetable and a protein source.

### **What Not to Eat**

- High-fat foods. Fat can slow the emptying of the stomach.
- High-fiber foods. While a high-fiber diet is good for overall health, consuming high-fiber foods right before an athletic event it can cause problems such as abdominal cramps and the need for bathroom breaks during exercise.
- Gas-forming foods such as beans and onions.

### **Pre-Game Meal Ideas**

Breakfast:

- French toast and orange juice
- Hash browns and scrambled eggs
- Cream of Wheat with fresh berries
- Low-fat granola with yogurt
- Waffles with strawberries

Lunch/Dinner:

- Chicken noodle soup with apple slices
- Fish tacos
- Baked potato with vegetable and sour cream toppings
- Rice and bean burrito
- Pita bread with hummus and fresh vegetables
- Oven-roasted potatoes, green beans and grilled chicken

### **Post-Exercise Nutrition**

During the first four to five hours after exercise, the body is more efficient at absorbing and storing energy. After hard workouts that have lasted several hours, it is important to take in a carbohydrate-rich food or beverage within the first 30 minutes to replenish muscle glycogen stores. Your child will need to rehydrate and eat foods rich in complex carbohydrates. Try not to offer empty calories from foods and fluids that are high in fat and/or sugar such as candy, chips or soda. Instead, offer a snack that is more nutrient dense such as a large banana, yogurt, or cup of orange juice. About two hours after strenuous exercise, a child should have a nutritious, carbohydrate-rich meal. This will help replenish his or her muscle glycogen stores and prepare him or her for their next training session.

### **Post-Exercise Meal Ideas**

#### Meal One:

- 1 baked potato with grated reduced-fat cheese and plain low-fat yogurt
- ½ cup steamed broccoli
- 3 oz grilled chicken
- 1 cup cubed melon
- 1 cup 1 percent or skim milk

#### Meal Two:

- 1 cup whole-wheat pasta
- ½ cup meat sauce/marinara
- ½ cup steamed green beans
- 1 piece of French bread
- 1 cup of 1 percent or skim milk

**For additional information, answers to questions or to schedule an appointment with a Lutheran Hospital Registered Dietitian, call 260-435-7991.**

*Fort-4-Fitness Kids Marathon is sponsored and supported by Lutheran Children's Hospital, Lutheran Weight Management Center and Lutheran Nutritional Services.*