

Ask the Expert: Child Athlete Nutrition

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Q: My 10-year-old son has been playing competitive soccer for two teams this year. Are there particular foods he should be eating to help him with his nutrition needs?



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A: All children need to eat balanced meals but, for a child athlete, there may need to be changes made to support a higher level of exercise and activity. Look to these simple rules to help your child athlete get the proper nutrition without dramatic weight gain or loss.

- Drink up! Dehydration will cause loss of energy, strength, even coordination and can lead to heat-related illnesses. It is recommended that you provide water every 15 to 20 minutes during physical activity. Sports drinks are OK but plain water is really the best option for hydration for children.
- Use variety with minerals and vitamins. Calcium and iron are very important for athletes, but so are vitamin A, B and D.
- Look for lean proteins. Too much protein can lead to dehydration and calcium loss so look for lean proteins, such as fish, poultry, nuts and soy products when planning meals.
- Eat carbohydrates. Some diet plans urge weight conscious people to eliminate carbohydrates but for a young athlete they are an important fuel source. Look for whole grain carbohydrates, such as brown rice, and whole-grain breads or pastas.
- Don't rely on energy drinks, bars or powders. These can work in a pinch or after a big game to replace a child's energy but these types of alternative energy sources don't offer the type of nutrients necessary to build healthy bone and muscle.
- The day of a big game, eat about three hours or more before activity and keep your meals high in carbohydrates and protein but low in fat. Fat is harder for the body to digest and can cause an upset stomach.

Just like any coach, what you teach your child about eating will go on to help them form habits in the future. If you are mindful about your own thoughts and perceptions—keeping a positive attitude about eating healthy and exercise—chances are your children will pick up the same attitude. These basic guidelines can help you create an environment that encourages your children to eat right and maintain a healthy weight to prevent future problems.