“Fueling Your Body for Sports”

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If you’re active (couch surfing aside!) you can consider yourself an athlete. Engaging in regular physical activity, recreational or professional, by the nature of the extra stresses placed on your body, increases your body’s nutritional needs. Ignoring or mismanaging this increased demand for good nutrition, has the potential to impair your sport enjoyment and performance. Keeping in mind a few broad strategies when embracing sports nutrition needs can keep you off the sideline and in the game scoring and reaching goals!

Know your needs

Finding out what your body’s actual nutrient needs are is important. This means knowing how much energy, protein, fat, carbohydrate, water, vitamins, and minerals to support general health as well as your increased activity level. Not having enough of the right nutrients can impair your athletic experience and put your body at risk for injury and/or illness. Being in the know certainly helps avoid the “spray and pray” technique. Available resources such as www.myplate.org can be a good first option. To really understand your needs and develop a personalized plan to meet them may require the guidance of a Sports Nutritionist, who is also a Registered Dietitian.

The best offense is a good defense

In general, aim for good nutrition most of the time, over time. We might consider this a “best odds” long term approach. When an athlete makes good helpful foods available on a consistent basis, this maximizes nutrient availability to support the body’s increased nutritional needs. Variety and balance amongst foods is key in this regard. Don’t rely on just one color of fruit and vegetable, one type of grain, or one type of protein. Mix it up while keeping your personal preferences in mind. Aiming for smaller meals and snacks more frequently can also help athletes meet their needs without having to feel overstuffed at any one given meal or snack.

Carbohydrate is not a bad word, it’s key!

Carbohydrate is the primary fuel that runs our bodies and fuels our exercise. Fruits, veggies, beans, peas, and legumes, whole grains, and dairy can be great sources. Neglecting it can leave you without sufficient energy and bring on fatigue sooner than desired. A car driving to Norwalk from New York City needs more gas than a car driving to Norwalk from Stamford, because it’s doing more work. The same

concept applies to exercise. More exercise can translate to higher need for fuel from carbohydrate. “Topping off” carbohydrate stores and blood sugar within 30 minutes of exercise with a small amount of quicker digesting carbohydrate can help maximize fuel availability during your session. If your session lasts 60 minutes or more, you may need additional sources of easily digested carbohydrate during exercise to prevent fatigue. After exercise, your muscle are like a sponge, and want to soak up or “replenish” their stores of fuel, so eating carbohydrate within 30 minutes of exercise to take advantage of the “metabolic window” is recommended.

Protein is power

Protein provides the building blocks to repair and strengthen lean body muscle tissue.

A variety of high quality lean proteins, coming from different sources like beans, legumes, soy, nuts and seeds, lower fat dairy, lean chicken, pork, fish, and beef, is recommended and can help meet the body’s amino acid needs by providing needed amino acids on a consistent basis Though protein is helpful throughout the day, it is most effective in terms of exercise, in the recovery phase, or post exercise period (new sentence)15-25 grams of protein post exercise helps to maximize muscle protein synthesis.

Timing with exercise

Pre-exercise is a great time to think about volume, timing, and composition of food intake. Exercise causes blood to shift from the abdominal area to working muscles during exercise, which may impair digestion and lead to cramps and/or gastrointestinal distress, if food is present in the stomach. Protein and fat take a fair amount of time to digest while most carbohydrates, in comparison, can digest relatively quickly. The closer you get to exercise, the simpler digesting the food (i.e. carbohydrate) and the smaller the volume of food, you want to consume.

Personal hydration plan

Water is an athlete’s best friend. Being properly hydrated can delay fatigue and maintain mental acuity, optimize the body’s ability to regulate body heat, satisfy thirst and prevent significant weight loss from sweating, and improve ability to recover quickly from training and competition. The key is to begin exercise well hydrated. Consuming large quantities of water immediately before exercise is not a recommended strategy for hydrating and can potentially place the body in an unsafe position during exercise. Rather, drinking water on a regular basis in smaller amounts over time, and eating water rich foods, is a helpful strategy to achieve and maintain good hydration levels. For short duration exercise of less than 60 minutes of low to moderate intensity water is a good choice for before, during and after. For moderate to high intensity activity lasting longer than 60 minutes, sports drinks containing 6-8% carbohydrate may be more appropriate and helpful in maintaining fluid and electrolyte levels.

One size does not fit all

Keep in mind, nutrition is very individualized, and therefore one size does not fit all. Even within the same sport, and individuals on the same team, differences in nutritional needs will exist. To maximize your sport enjoyment and/or performance keep your nutrition awareness high, reach out to a sports nutritionist who can properly and effectively guide you, and enjoy your sport and your food!