

The Importance of Nutrition

By Jessica Yep, MS, RD, CDN

Good nutrition, combined with regular exercise and/or physical activity, is not only imperative for athletes, but is also the foundation of good health for individuals of all ages. There are many benefits of regular exercise including: weight control, muscle strengthening, better agility and balance and risk reduction for heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. The body utilizes nutrients from a variety of healthful foods for growth, energy, to maintain a healthy immune system and to keep the body functioning properly. A healthy diet along with adequate physical activity keeps the body healthy, strong and at a good weight.

The body requires six essential nutrients to function properly: carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamins, minerals and water. The body cannot make these nutrients in sufficient amounts, so they must be obtained from food or supplements.

Carbohydrates (CHOs), proteins and fats all provide energy (also known as calories) for the body, however CHOs are the primary and preferred source of energy. CHOs include whole grain pasta, rice, bread, beans, fruits and vegetables. Protein builds and repairs cells and tissues and helps make hormones and antibodies needed for proper immune function. Food sources include meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts/seeds and dairy foods. Fat is needed in adequate amounts for the absorption of certain vitamins into the body, and to be used as energy in the event CHO stores have been depleted. Healthy fat sources include olive/canola oil, nuts/seeds, fish, low-fat dairy products and tofu. Water comprises over two-thirds of the weight of the body, and keeping well hydrated is

very important, especially during physical activity. Water is found in foods and beverages such as fruits, vegetables, soup, milk and juice.

A well-balanced and varied diet also supports a healthy immune system. The body's protective defense network is designed to protect it against bacteria, viruses and other disease-causing organisms. Antioxidants are substances found in foods like fruits and vegetables that protect cells from free radicals, or molecules that cause cell damage and have a negative impact on the immune system. Probiotics are good bacteria and/or yeasts that help restore the balance between good and bad bacteria in the digestive tract. Maintaining this balance in the gut is necessary for optimal health. Similar to antioxidants, probiotics enhance the immune system by protecting against germs. Probiotics are present in cultured dairy foods such as yogurt and kefir, fermented vegetables like sauerkraut and kimchee and miso, a thick paste made from soy.

Maintaining a healthy body weight is good for overall health and may reduce the risk for developing many diseases. Following healthy eating habits such as three moderately portioned meals plus two to three snacks with plenty of water daily is a step towards maintaining a healthy weight. Any healthy eating and weight plan is based on a varied, well-balanced diet and regular physical activity.

While the basics of maintaining good health are the same, our nutritional needs change as we get older. Energy/calorie needs tend to decrease as we age (over 50 years old); however certain nutrients are needed in greater quantities to sustain particular body processes. Examples include vitamin B12, which helps to maintain the nervous system, as well as vitamin D and calcium, which work together to maintain strong bones. Vitamin B12 sources include meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy foods. Vitamin D sources include

fatty fish (salmon and tuna), fish oil and fortified foods like cereal and milk. Foods rich in calcium include milk, yogurt, cheese, dark green leafy vegetables and fortified orange juice.

Proper nutrition and regular physical activity are paramount to a healthy lifestyle, whether one is training as an athlete or just to maintain optimal health. When combined with regular exercise, healthy food choices help to achieve a healthy body weight, support the immune system and keep the body functioning properly.

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