

Diet and Nutrition

You would not send your child onto the soccer field without the right boots and shin guards or let them stay up into the early hours the day before a big game.

Proper preparation for sport is as important for children as it is for adults, and the right diet is a key in achieving peak performance.

We are all aware that a balanced diet is vital to our overall health. Essentially we all need foods that contain:

- Proteins (build up, maintain and replace body tissue) meat, fish eggs, beans, cheese
- Carbohydrates (broken down to provide energy) bread, pasta, rice, breakfast cereal, fruit
- Vitamins and minerals (Important for growth, bone development, blood production, wound healing) fruit, vegetables, red meat, pulses, breakfast cereal
- Fats (Not the enemy. The right amount aids growth and vitamin absorption) meat, dairy products, oily fish, nuts

However, there remains a good deal of confusion as to the correct balance for young sportspeople and exactly what and when. This is added to by the sometimes contradictory advice coming from dietary and nutrition experts.

A recent survey conducted by the American Dietetic Association's sports nutrition practice group highlighted the confusion among parents.

Findings and recommendations:

Nearly 60 per cent of parents thought a high protein diet was the best way to build muscle.

Latest recommendations - Kids involved in sport build muscles through a balanced diet with high carbohydrate content (50 to 55 percent carbohydrate, 10 to 15 percent protein and 25 to 30 percent fat).

More than 70 per cent of parents thought children should drink when thirsty rather than have a regular routine.

Latest recommendations - By the time children feel thirsty they have probably already dehydrated. Drink regularly in smaller quantities before, during and after exercise.

More than one third of parents believe protein-rich foods provide the best fuel for young athletes.

Latest recommendations - High protein diets remain popular despite overwhelming research showing carbohydrate-rich foods are the best short-term fuels. According to youth sports nutritionist Suzanne Nelson: "The results are cause for concern, given more than 30 million children and adolescents participate in organized sports in the United States each year.

"With all the conflicting nutrition information out there, parents are having a hard time separating fact from fiction and there's a huge need to get the right information out."

Gender differences:

There are no major differences in diet recommended by nutritionists for active boys and girls between the ages of 4 and 18. The only slight variation is in calorie intake, with boys requiring fractionally more than girls i.e. at age 12 the recommended calorie count per day for boys are 2,600 against 2,200 for girls.

However, this only tells half the story. Especially among teenage girls, on whom there is much external pressure to stay thin, it is far harder to convince them to meet their daily calorific needs than it is with boys. Closer parental monitoring to avoid susceptibility to injury and health problems, including potential eating disorders, may be needed.

Drinking

Drinking right is just as important to general health and match-day performance as is the correct diet.

Dehydration, a lack of fluids, can often occur during and after sustained physical exercise and lead to fatigue, lack of concentration and muscle cramps.

To avoid dehydration a sufficient intake of water is necessary. However, it is not always that easy to persuade young athletes to drink plain old H²O. A recent study of sports camps conducted by the University of Connecticut found that between 50 and 75 per cent of participants were significantly dehydrated despite a ready availability of water.

Liquids should be taken before the game (up to 16 ounces over a two hour period), in small gulps during breaks in play and up to 24 ounces within two hours after the game.

Sports drinks provoke much debate. Some parents seem them as over-priced soft drinks or gimmicks. However, another recent study showed that while kids drank only 50 per cent of the fluids required when offered water, when offered sports drinks they drank 90 per cent more.

Not only is it easier to get children to take sports drinks on account of the taste, there is also a growing consensus that the minerals they contain, particularly sodium helps combats fatigue and cramp and the carbohydrate element does improve energy levels.

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