

FOOD IS FUEL

by Jill Castle, MS, RDN

Food is fuel. Just like a car needs fuel to operate, so does the body. Without enough food, changes happen in the body affecting a number of daily functions, including athletic performance. Young swimmers may be at risk for under-eating or poor eating. Combine these with the high calorie demand of swimming and ongoing growth and it's easy to see that low food intake can be a real problem.

These 7 signs may signal the young swimmer needs more food:



1. Weight loss or lack of weight gain: Sudden weight loss is an obvious sign that food consumption is too low. In the growing athlete, a lack of expected annual weight gain is also a red flag. For instance, an average 7-year-old is expected to gain about 4 to 5 pounds per year, while an average 10-year-old will gain about 9 to 10 pounds per year. Adolescents, during their peak growth spurt, may gain even more. If expected weight gain isn't happening, look for eating patterns that may be responsible.



2. Lack of growth: Persistent or long-term shortages on food intake may affect a child or teen's height. This can be seen as stunting—a lack in height growth. Poor weight gain or weight loss is the first sign in this scenario, so be sure to act before it progresses to this irreversible outcome.



3. Concentration: The brain relies on glucose and other nutrients to operate effectively. Enough food provided at intervals of every 3 to 4 hours helps growing swimmers pay attention in class, stay focused for competition, learn and think.



4. Chronic Fatigue: Swimming burns calories and is physically demanding, making even some of the best swimmers struggle with fatigue. Poor food intake can amplify fatigue, and may promote a vicious cycle of exercise, exhaustion and not eating enough. Watch food intake so that the body has the nutrients available for growth and proper physical recovery.



5. Frequent illness: Illness is the enemy of athletic improvement. Getting sick with common colds, infections and viruses can be due, in part, to poor nutrition. Lack of nutritious food can also interfere with getting over an illness, prolonging the recovery period.



6. Trouble sleeping: With vigorous and frequent exercise, one would think that sleeping would be easy. However, poor nutrition may be linked to shorter duration of sleep, according to a 2013 study from the University of Pennsylvania. Researchers found that people who slept for 5 to 6 hours a night had diets that missed out on certain nutrients and had less variety overall. Those who slept longer (8-9 hours) had better diet quality. More research is needed in the area of nutrition and sleep, especially for athletes.

7. Poor swimming performance: Training hard and not improving? Flat times? Higher than normal race times? These may be signs that the amount and quality of food is off. Remember, food is fuel for working muscles. If nutrition is lackluster, swimming will be too. The good news—it's an easy fix!

If you see one or more of these signs, check food intake and the overall balance of nutrition. It's easy to increase and improve food intake, and a qualified nutrition professional can help. For individual guidance, find a sports registered dietitian/nutritionist here (<http://www.scandpg.org/>).

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