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TOP TIPS FOR BUILDING MUSCLE AND IMPROVING BODY COMPOSITION

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BY CHRIS ROSENBLUM, PHD, RDN, CSSD

Many young swimmers ask me what to eat to build muscle and lose fat. When I get that question, I ask the swimmer to take a step back and try to spell out his or her goals, because the truth is, it is hard to build muscle (a process that requires additional calories and protein) and lose fat at the same time (a process that requires reducing calorie intake and increasing calorie-burning exercise).

Another reason I ask about goals is that it is never a good idea to work on improving body composition in-season. It is hard to alter your diet or try to cut calories when hard training and competitive meets are happening at regular intervals.

And, lastly, many swimmers, especially female swimmers, have unrealistic goals for their bodies. Women naturally have more body fat than men, and poor body image plagues many young (and older) women.

Recently I talked to a young athlete who showed me the cover of her favorite fitness magazine and she said wanted "that body." I reminded her that magazine models are not only taller and thinner than most women, but they also have their photos airbrushed and photoshopped to make them look even more "perfect."

With those reminders, it is possible to improve body composition (notice I did not say lose fat or lose weight) through a combination of strength training, aerobic exercise, food choices and food patterns.

1. Eat regular meals throughout the day to fuel your body. Swimmers need regular meals to provide energy for sport and fuel for recovery. Aim for 3 meals and 3 small snacks each day. Check the [nutrition archives](#) of USA Swimming for articles on how best to achieve this.



2. Include protein at every meal and snack. Protein provides the building blocks for protein muscle synthesis. No need to overload on protein (protein powders and shakes are not necessary to get high quality protein), but include a protein-rich food at each eating occasion. Milk, yogurt, cheese, milk-or yogurt smoothies, eggs, turkey, chicken, lean beef and pork, nuts, seeds and beans and peas are all good sources of protein. An egg sandwich for breakfast, a carton of yogurt for a snack, a turkey and cheese sandwich for lunch, a handful of nuts in the afternoon, spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, and a bowl of cereal and milk in the evening all provide high quality protein for swimmers.



3. Feed your muscles after a strength workout. A small protein-carbohydrate snack after weight training can provide needed amino acids to build muscle and strengthen muscle fibers. Low-fat chocolate milk has been extensively studied as a recovery beverage, and while not as glamorous as expensive commercial protein shakes, it does the job very well. A combination of protein and carbohydrate eaten shortly after strength training is recommended to speed the nutrients to muscles.



4. Be realistic. Not everyone will have a six-pack of abs. (There's no evidence that a "six pack" improves swimming performance!) What is important is your health, how well you perform in training and competition, and how you feel about yourself.

Chris Rosenbloom is the sports nutrition consultant for Georgia State University Athletics and is the editor of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Sports Nutrition Manual, 5th edition, 2012. She welcomes questions from swimmers, parents and coaches. Email her at chrisrosenbloom@gmail.com.

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