

5 Bad Eating Habits Swimmers Must Break

11/11/2014 by Jill Castle, MS, RDN

A habit is a regular tendency that is hard to give up. When it comes to food and eating, there are good habits and there are bad ones. Good eating habits promote health, overall wellness, and may even optimize swimming performance. Bad habits, on the other hand, may get in the way of athletic performance and future potential. Here are some of the bad eating habits I see among young swimmers:

Skipping Breakfast: It's estimated that about 20% of kids (9-13 years) and 36% of teens (14-18 years) skip breakfast. The reasons vary, but in the case of the swimmer, they include running short on time in the morning, not feeling hungry, or eating too much the night before, which can suppress hunger in the morning. Swimmers need breakfast, not only for revving up their engine (metabolism), but also for paying attention in school, meeting important nutrient requirements, and feeling energized throughout the day. Breakfast kicks everything in motion—the swimmers "engine," and his brain—so skipping it is a habit that needs to be broken. Don't be picky about a full course meal! Almost anything for breakfast is better than nothing. Try a smoothie, instant oatmeal, a handful of nuts and cereal, a bar, or even a box of flavored milk.

Light-loading Lunch: Some swimmers are "watching their weight," and in doing so may think it's healthy to opt for a salad or a cup of soup for lunch, or maybe a sandwich and nothing else. This uber-healthy approach, which sounds like a good (and healthy) idea, really doesn't work, especially if afterschool training is on the horizon. Lunch is the meal that loads the swimmer's body with essential carbs and protein (as well as other nutrients) for training. So a salad or broth-based soup won't cut it, but a sandwich or wrap on whole grain bread served with a cup of soup and fresh fruit would be ideal.

Overeating Later (after school, practice, and late at night): When the swimmer skips or light-loads on eating earlier in the day, he is bound to experience significant hunger, eventually. After school or practice, or even after a full dinner, hunger may rear its ugly head, and the swimmer may overeat, and perhaps even binge (eat a large amount of food in a short period of time). Overeating can cause unwanted weight gain, and if done at night, may interfere with the morning appetite, and disturb a healthy rhythm of eating during the day. Back-loading calories at the end of the day robs the swimmer's body of needed nutrients for training and learning at school when he needs it most—during the day!

Eating the Wrong Food: Candy, sweet muffins, chocolate-coated granola bars, chips, and cookies are the wrong foods for swimmers to be snacking on, or eating routinely. Once in a while, on a non-training day, or in the context of other healthy foods is acceptable, but relying on unhealthy foods to sustain a training program or competition is silly. While these foods can fit in to the swimmer's diet, their role should be minimal. For example, one or two regular portions of sweets can fit into the swimmer's diet without crashing it, however, eating a chocolate chip muffin for breakfast, a big cookie and chips at lunch, popping Skittles throughout practice or competition, and finishing the day with ice cream or fried food is a bad idea, and a blossoming bad habit. Eating the right foods, and downsizing the wrong foods, is an area where many young swimmers can do better.

Forgetting Fluids: A headache, feeling tired, and a sense of hunger may be signs of poor drinking habits. True, dehydration is common among young athletes and stems from getting behind in fluid consumption. Prepping for practice takes place all day, from eating nutritious, juicy food to drinking enough water or other beverages. Some swimmers forget to drink, and play catch-up at practice, which is hard to do. Ideally, swimmers should drink fluids all day (preferably water, milk or small amounts of 100% juice), come to practice with water or a sports drink, drink throughout training, and replenish with more fluids during their recovery and the rest of the day.

Don't let these bad eating habits curbside the swimmer's hard work in and out of the pool!

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