

A Guide to Nutrition for Young Swimmers

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Nutrition is incredibly important for endurance and performance at swim meets. Proper nutrition keeps the kids energy and strength levels at optimum and avoids the dreaded “post meet” crash. Recovery is faster and performance is greatly enhanced.

It is important for any athlete to consume healthy protein foods, combined with smaller amounts of carbohydrates. Protein not only helps to build muscle, but it stabilizes our blood sugar, keeping energy and endurance steady. A carbohydrate will give an immediate rush, but within 30-60 minutes, the blood sugar will crash, resulting in cranky and irritable kids and very fatigued bodies! It is incredibly important to incorporate good fats into the diet on a regular basis. Good fats include fish, fish oils, nuts, avocados, olive oil. These “plump” up our cells so that we can maintain a good vitamin/mineral balance and more importantly, protect against dehydration. Quick fats found in processed foods will actually slow the body down and prevent the body from working optimally during exercise.

Water is an incredibly important part of an athlete’s diet. The general rule of thumbs is that a person should consume a MINIMUM of half their body weight in ounces daily. For example, someone who weighs 100 pounds would need to consume 50 oz of water daily just maintain healthy cell function. With vigorous exercise, this amount must be increased. For every can of soda consumed, an extra glass of water needs to be added.

It is advised to eat a meal 2-4 hours prior to an athletic event and have a healthy, small snack 1-2 hours before the event. Always arm the child with small healthy snacks so they can quickly grab something of nutritional substance when hungry.

Below are some suggestions on meals, sources of good proteins and tips on what to avoid.

Healthy Protein Sources:

- Nuts, such as walnuts, almonds, Brazil nuts – which contain high quality protein source and minerals and fats. Peanuts and Cashews are not as effective.
- Nut butters, such as almond butter. Fantastic on crackers, vegetables and a great source of high quality protein and healthy omega 3 fats.
- Lean meats, eaten in smaller quantities at one time: chicken, fish.
- Protein powders: fantastic tool for energy. Put in smoothies with fruit and blend for breakfast. Carry with you to meets and add water for a snack. Protein powders come in a variety of types. Most highly effective are rice, pea, hemp, chia powders. They also make whey and soy based powders that are great in a pinch, but can also cause inflammatory reactions in some people. Shop at health food stores for these powders, as opposed to pre-made shakes sold at large distributors that are overly processed.
- Protein bars that are whole food based – Salba bars, Vega Whole food bars, ProBar, Bora bora Bars, Mrs Mays Naturals.

Great in between meet snacks:

- Trail Mix – a visit to whole foods, sprouts, sunflower market has bulk selections and you can make your own mixes. Helps with variety! Don't forget seeds, such as pumpkin seeds!
- Handful of almonds
- Whole food bar
- Almond butter and jelly sandwich
- Role of non processed turkey/chicken
- Berries are GREAT! Blueberries are easy to pack and taste yummy!
- Apple/Pears/Kiwi/Mango/grapes
- Protein shake
- Baby carrots/sliced jicama
- Hummus with vegetables or whole grain crackers
- Many kids drink Gatorade for electrolyte repletion. Another suggestion that has less sugar is a product called recharge. Or electro mix packets added to water!

Foods to avoid in weeks leading up to events or season:

- Heavy simple carbohydrate foods, such as large quantities of bread, pizza, pasta. Minimize consumption overall, but when eaten, choose rice based pastas, sprouted breads.
- Avoid sugary foods! Avoid High fructose corn syrup, corn syrup solids. Be aware of sugary drinks, such as soda, juice that is not 100% fruit.
- Avoid baked goods, such as cookies, cupcakes etc. These are not good snacks and they give a high rush of blood sugar and then bog the body down with digestion, which takes focus and energy away from winning the race!
- Chips are a very popular snack for kids because they are so readily available in vending machines, and snack bars. These provide virtually no nutrition to the body and affect endurance. Good replacements to chips are dried fruits, fruit chips, veggie chips.
- Many of the protein bars on the market are loaded with sugar and processed foods, some examples are cliff bars, power bars. See list above for good alternatives that provide more nutrition.

Meals that assist athlete performance Breakfast

- Oatmeal with berries and walnuts. Can add a small amount of honey or agave syrup.
- Protein smoothies: Plant based protein powder, banana, berries, tbsp. of nut butter and dash of honey. Can mix and match fruits and vegetables. Blend with organic skim milk, soy milk, almond milk (try it!), rice milk or juice.
- Nut based granola (buy or make at health food store to avoid large amounts of added sugar) with almond milk and berries. Can also mix with yogurt (consider alternates to cow based milk yogurts, such as goat yogurt, coconut yogurts. If using dairy based, consider greek yogurt or organic)

- Can add in a scrambled egg or two as a side for additional protein. Better yet, make an omelet with fresh vegetables.
- Avoid sugary cereals, heavy bread/toast/bagel consumption.
- Most important.....DO NOT SKIP BREAKFAST!!! If running late, put protein powder in shaker cup, fill with water/juice and drink on the go! Grab an apple, banana and some nuts for protein and eat on the way!

Lunch examples:

- Lean meat with sprouted wheat bread, green leafy green (green/red lettuce, romaine, kale, arugula. Avoid iceberg lettuce), vegetables of choice (cucumber, tomato, onion) and some sliced avocado. If vegetarian, use tempeh or tofu as the meat. Use hummus as a protein rich spread!
- Salads! Think of interesting combinations, some great salad add-ins are dried fruits, nuts, seeds, beans, jicama, cucumber, fruits (apples, strawberries, pineapple, mango). Use a light dressing, such as a light balsamic vinaigrette as opposed to heavy dressings such as ranch, thousand island etc.
- It is important to get vegetables into the diet and lunch is a great time to have a side of vegetables, such as carrots or cucumbers. Consider these easy to grab side dishes as opposed to chips and processed foods.

Dinner examples:

- Dinner is a good time to get in more vegetables for vitamins and minerals. Choose a protein main dish, whether it be 3-5oz of meat or vegetarian option such as lentils, tofu, tempeh and pair it with 1-2 vegetables. If you are using a carbohydrate, such as rice, bread, pasta, make that the smallest part of the meal. Focus on the nutrition first and add those as accompaniments to the main meal, not as the main meal!

The fast food situation:

Children and Teenagers need more calories than adults, particularly if they are active. The key is to focus on the nutritional value of the food being consumed rather than counting the calories or reaching caloric goals with poorly nutrient foods. Fast food restaurants do have some healthier options if you order them in a healthy way, so in a pinch, when you have no other option, here are some tips for fast food eating:

- Get a hamburger or chicken patty without cheese or bun. Wrap it in lettuce! Opt for a side salad with a light dressing, such as vinaigrette as the side instead of French fries. Some places have fruit as a side dish, which is a nice way to get a healthy carbohydrate.
- When ordering from sandwich places, load up on the vegetables on the sandwich and get fruit on the side. Consider ordering sandwiches from a grocery store deli rather than chain store. They are just as quick, but tend to have more quality side dish options and better quality vegetables. You can also make a sandwich into a salad!
- At Asian based fast food places, skip tons of sauce and get extra vegetables with the meat/tofu.
- For Mexican based fast food chains, choose the “bare” or “bowl” option. Skip the excess cheese and sour cream and have a little guacamole (avocados are good for you!).