

## Nutrition for youth soccer players

There are many medical studies and articles detailing the proper dietary intake needed for youth athletes. Soccer players tend to burn a large amount of calories during a competition. It is critical to make sure the athlete has adequate useable calories for the game to ensure peak performance. Have you ever noticed that a number of games between high caliber teams that are fairly equal in skill are decided in the final minute. The difference usually is the player's physical and mental endurance which is directly related to adequate nutrition. If blood sugar drops too low, concentration and energy will fall as well.

The body generates energy from carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Carbohydrates are the easiest to turn in to energy. Proteins are burned more slowly but last longer and fats take the longest. Make sure your child eats a light meal at least 1 hour before a game. Young players need lots of carbohydrates (breads, pasta, rice, pancakes etc). Whole grains are preferred. Avoid fried or very high fat foods which are slower to digest. Also avoid highly concentrated sweets (candy, cake etc) that can lead to a glucose spike then rapid drop which will severely limit concentration and energy. Hydration should be included in the pre game routine. Water should be adequate for most young athletes unless it is very hot or humid or if there are back to back games. Too much of the sports drinks can lead to the previously mentioned sugar high then crash. Post game meals are important as well especially during tournaments. If you will stay at the fields, bring appropriate food instead of relying on the concession stand hot dogs and candy. Fruits, whole grain breads, granola bars, pretzels and light sandwiches can be easily kept in a cooler for between game snacks.

Players should have a stable nutritional base that includes adequate amounts of protein, carbohydrates and fats. There is a new food pyramid by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that details this. The athlete should also get appropriate vitamins and minerals from their diet. Iron and calcium are especially important in adolescent females and supplementation may be needed in this group if they do not get adequate amounts in their diet. A recent study of NCAA female athletes by Dr Mark Reinking showed significantly higher injury rates and slower recovery in athletes with abnormal and low calorie eating habits including bulimia and anorexia. Three quarters of the athletes in the study with disordered eating had leg pain especially in the runners. There were also more stress fractures in this group. There is a well documented condition called the Female Athlete Triad that includes low energy, menstrual disorders and weak bones. In the past coaches would tell the female athletes that they were training hard enough when they stopped having periods. We now know this is a sign of calorie deficiency.

The proper balance and timing of your child's eating will give them the best chance to be successful. As a parent, you can provide them with the nutrition that will help them to be their best. Who knows maybe it will be your child making the perfectly timed pass or scoring the goal in the final minute to win the game. Eat well, play well!

