

Athletic Nutrition

by Allison Wendt

As athletes, we spend countless hours practicing to perform at our optimal ability. We work constantly, relinquishing valued time, missing out on social events, all in pursuit of being the best at what we do. The irony is that all of the hard work and dedication may be undermined by our poor nutritional habits. Proper nutrition can constitute the difference between winning and losing. While athletes are overwhelmed with the latest supplements and performance-enhancing drugs, many overlook the effect of good nutrition. Here are some tips on creating a healthy diet that will in turn fuel your goals:

1. **Carbohydrates, Proteins, and Fats** - These are the nutrients that provide energy to perform work. Try to intake a balance of these foods.
2. **Don't use the excuse 'I'm too busy to eat'** - There is usually time to eat but you will have to be flexible and creative with your food choices. Yes, you will have to compromise and make some of your food portable. We are living in a fast paced world and everything is go-go-go. Slow down and take care of yourselves. Grab a healthy snack in between classes, before a workout, or while watching a movie.
3. **Carry a food cooler** - This goes along with what we discussed in the area of to busy to eat. Carry a small over-the-shoulder cooler with you and this will open new doors for you. Do not go anywhere without your snack bag—always be prepared. Fruit, granola bars, veggies, sandwich and water are a few items that should be bound in any cooler. If you go all day without properly eating we are more prone to binge eating when you finally get to some food. We need to focus on eating small frequent meals to stabilize the blood sugar levels. This will prevent binging and also give us more energy.
4. **Do not stop eating to loose weight** - By not eating, your body goes into a fasting mode and your metabolism will slow down. The body holds onto everything because it does not know when the next meal will come. Small frequent meals are the best because this will increase your metabolism and provide a constant source of energy.
5. **Never skip breakfast** - Breakfast is one of the most important meals and maybe even more so for adolescent athletes. During the course of an 8 - 12 hour sleep period, a large part of their liver glycogen stores are depleted. It is important they eat in order to replenish these stores and provide energy to get them through morning classes
6. **The golden hour after training** - We only have one hour to get food into our system after working out. It is called the golden hour because this is when your body really needs the nutrients for energy and repair. Not eating before directly after a practice can lead to diminished performance. Over the span of a few weeks, the effects of this energy deficiency accumulate. Athletes struggle through practice, constantly tired, suffer nagging injuries, have poor quality of sleep, and slowly lose motivation.
7. **Eating out** - Be careful when you eat out because Americans want more food for the buck. This means that we are not happy with a restaurant if we do not get a ton of food when we pay for a meal. Just because the waitress served us a huge meal, does not mean we have to eat it all in one serving. Eat half now and the other half later.
8. **Food labels** - The most important information on the food label is the serving size. Everyone looks at the calories and fat but they forget to see how small that serving size is. Checking out all the ingredients is also beneficial.
9. **Eating before bed** - Try to stop eating 1 - 3 hours before you go to bed to ensure your last meal is fully digested.
10. **Hydrate** - Drink your water! Water is absolutely essential for life and for optimal performance. Soda is commonly referred to as an empty carrier because all they deliver is processed sugars. There are no beneficial vitamins, minerals, or fiber, just sugar. Many of the sodas contain caffeine which will dehydrate your system. The exact amount of fluid you need depends on many factors, but a good rule of thumb is to consume 70 - 100 ounces (1/2 to 3/4 of a gallon) of fluid each day just to replace normal losses.
11. **Eat small frequent meals** - Eating small frequent meals helps to avoid over consumption by way of binge eating. It also helps to speed up metabolism. Finally, eating small frequent meals helps you to get more of the nutrients your body needs.
12. **Be aware of eating disorders** - Unfortunately, body image is very prevalent for the female athlete. Coaches, friends, and parents need to be aware of the signs and symptoms and be prepared to help.

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