

Pre-game nutrition tips for youth athletes

Any sports parent knows that the right food can make or break a player's performance! Hungry athletes are energy-less performers and it's impossible for them to play their best if their bodies don't have the fuel needed in order to perform. But just because you fed your child on the way to the game (we've all done the drive-thru run), doesn't mean that he/she is actually in tip-top shape. Being full isn't the same thing as being 100% ready to play!

Here are three pre-game nutrition tips for youth athletes:

1. Choose complex carbs with fiber.

When you eat candy (which is full a sugar, a simple carbohydrate), those fructose molecules head directly to your small intestine. From there, they are quickly converted into glucose and absorb into your bloodstream through intestinal walls. Glucose is what fuels your body and is what causes that "sugar high" when young kids eat a lot of candy. It's like pouring rocket fuel into the engine of a car! But when those simple carbohydrates are burned through, your athlete is more likely to suffer from a sugar crash and be even more sluggish than before.

Complex carbohydrate molecules, on the other hand, are more complex simply because they require more work to be converted into glucose. When we chew, our saliva surrounds complex starch molecules and begins breaking them down into maltose. The enzymes in your small intestine break it down further into the smaller glucose molecules that enter the bloodstream. Since it takes more work for our bodies to break down complex carbohydrates, they provide fuel for longer periods of time and athletes are less likely to "crash".

Whole grain foods are made of complex carbohydrates, which is why many cross-country teams have big pasta dinners the night before a big race. The pre-game meal that really matters is the night before, because it can take 24 to 48 hours to really stock your muscles with glycogen so you walk onto the field totally fueled.

2. Eat lean proteins.

Protein is important, especially post-game because protein is what helps rebuild muscles, but eating a heavy steak a few hours before the game might be more than a youth athlete can handle or even needs. Have steak the night before so your body has time to pull all the necessary nutrients out and digest the rest, and save lean proteins like turkey for the morning of the game. You really want to eat 2 to 3 hours BEFORE the game so your body has time to turn that food into valuable nutrients. If you eat too much protein right before a game, you won't have time to digest everything before the game. And you know how sluggish you can feel on a full stomach! This also helps prevent cramping — and cramps aren't what you want on the field!

3. Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!

It doesn't matter how well fed your youth athlete is if he/she steps on the field dehydrated. Your child's athletic performance can be affected even by mild dehydration so make sure your athlete has 1 or 2 cups of water before the game/practice (more if it's a hot day), and constantly drinks throughout the game. Most players need at least ½ to 1 cup of water for every 15 to 20 minutes of exercise. Plain water is usually all kids need to keep adequately hydrated. Sports drinks are designed to provide energy and replace electrolytes (sodium and potassium) that athletes lose as they sweat, so if your child is going to be active for more than one hour (soccer, lacrosse, cross country, tennis), sports drinks may be a viable option.