

Proper Nutrition for Optimum Sports Performance: Top Tips

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Eating a healthy diet assists with weight control, lowers disease risk and improves overall health, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. However, following the proper eating plan is more critical for athletes, according to Dr. Tim Bain, DC, CEO of B3 Medical - Sports Medicine and team chiropractor for the Tampa Bay Lightning. Sometimes, it can even keep them in the game.

For instance, after helping a pro baseball player lose 60 pounds - dropping the number on the scale from 298 to 238 - not only did this athlete's allergies go away, but so did the arthritis in his hands. Ultimately, this player went from having a condition that threatened his career to winning MVP and becoming a three-time All Star.

Nutrition's Role in Sports Performance

What makes nutrition so important to an athlete's career? "Poor nutrition leads to a deficit in the building blocks of tissue systems as well as the building blocks of the energy and hormonal systems," says Dr. Bain. "Too few calories and, even worse, too few nutrient-dense calories, compromises the body's ability to repair and replace after exercise."

Eating the right foods can also improve injury recovery. "While proteins are our building blocks for muscle, fats will assist in hormonal responses as well as increasing the neurologic output necessary for our body to efficiently repair and replace damaged tissues," says Bain.

What type of diet can improve an athlete's performance? Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question.

Different Athletes, Different Needs

"All athletes are not created equally," says Dr. Bain. "There are absolutely different nutritional needs for athletes in different sports, and in fact, there are different needs in different positions in different sports."

An NFL lineman has different muscle-to-fat ratios than a running back, for instance, with the former needing a higher percentage of body fat and greater weight, and the latter requiring a fairly low body-fat percentage and a lower body weight to be more effective in that position.

So, while the basic dietary recommendations for both athletes would be similar, the calorie count would change. "In other words, the nutrient intake and micronutrient intake ratios will remain similar for optimal performance," says Dr. Bain, "but the lineman would have a higher caloric requirement daily to maintain mass."

A Common Nutritional Struggle

Dr. Bain shares that, when it comes to nutrition, many athletes struggle not necessarily with eating

the wrong things, but mainly by not eating throughout the day. "Many skip snacks with the mistaken thought that cutting calories is the best way to lose or manage weight, when they really should be managing body fat percentage to create a high-performance vehicle."

In fact, by not regularly consuming meals high in protein, athletes risk decreased performance and greater fat storage, says Dr. Bain, because the lack of this macronutrient "alters the hormonal response in the body and creates an ill-timed [catabolic state](#), leading to increased stress and stress reaction-based hormones."

Nutrient Timing

For instance, after completing an exercise session, the athlete should enter a "refueling stage" he says. The goal of this stage is to replace the nutrients utilized during the physical activity, better preparing the body for the next session.

During this refueling, Dr. Bain recommends athletes consume both an amino-acid source and a high glycemic index carbohydrate source. This helps "stop the phase of catabolism and begin the phase of anabolism and repair."

Don't Forget Rehydration

Rehydration during this refueling is also important, yet often overlooked, according to Dr. Bain. "Many athletes focus on hydration during a match, but do not put hydration as a priority in the recovery phase," says Bain, "[even though] it can be many times even more important."

Additionally, although it may be tempting to hydrate with the latest drinks on the market, he stresses that most are over-processed foods or can lead to other issues. Therefore, water is the best option.

Off-Season Nutrition

According to Dr. Bain, it's also important that athletes continue to watch their diet even when they're not actively playing. "Dealing with the stress of the season prior to jumping into an off-season training program is one of the most important and most missed part of the elite athletes' programs," he says.

That's why he recommends athletes "take time in the off-season to clean up and deal with the effects of increased stimulant-based activity, lack of sleep, and inconsistent dietary choices during the season." This helps decrease the inflammatory response and allows the body to have a much-deserved rest.

You Are Not What You Eat

Finally, most of us are familiar with the old adage, "You are what you eat." However, Dr. Bain says that this phrase is somewhat incomplete in that, in reality, "You are what you eat, digest, absorb and assimilate."

In other words, waste removal is an extremely important part of the process, too. "If your filters are working inefficiently, then you will, too," he says. "Treat them well and clean them with the seasons."

This leads to decreased inflammation and increased performance. It also creates "an added dimension of mental clarity," according to Dr. Bain, "which is too often overlooked in athletic

development."

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