

Nutrition for the Female Athlete

As I was struggling to keep up with my friend during a morning bike ride, she commented that she didn't consider herself an athlete since she didn't play sports. When I caught my breath, I asked her what she called someone that bikes close to 120 miles a week?

In my mind, an athlete is anyone who engages in physical exercise on a regular basis. We all think of soccer and basketball players as athletes, but what about dancers, gymnasts, swimmers, cyclists, cheerleaders, hikers, dog walkers, snowboarders, and skateboarders? Clearly, these are athletes as well.

Why is it important to talk specifically about nutrition for female athletes?

Women athletes who do not pay close attention to their nutrition, are subject to menstrual issues, stress fractures, fatigue, growth delay, impaired immune system, and poor athletic and school performance. A woman's menstrual cycle can deplete her of iron and nutrients, setting her up for problems. In addition, many female athletes, especially those in activities that promote leanness such as dancers, gymnasts, and cheerleaders consume less than 70% of their recommended daily caloric needs.

What does the female athlete need?

1. Carbohydrates: "Carbs" get such a bad rap but they are absolutely necessary for energy. 55-65% of daily calories should consist of healthy carbs such as fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and grains, oats, and beans. Avoid processed and high sugar foods.
2. Protein: Protein is essential for building and repairing muscle. 15-20% of daily calories should come from protein foods such as turkey, chicken, lean beef and pork, fish, eggs, beans, nut butters, dairy and tofu. Avoid synthetic protein bars, shakes, and powders.
3. Fat: Fats are necessary to help us repair our cells and absorb vitamins. Limit trans-fat and saturated fats, but include 25-30% of daily calories from healthy fats such as: protein foods, nuts, seeds, nut butter, fish, avocados, eggs, and olive oil.
4. Vitamins and Minerals: By eating a well-balanced diet you should get enough vitamins and minerals. However, many of our diets are lacking and many female athletes are iron deficient due to menstrual blood loss. Try to eat iron-rich foods daily such as meat, fish, dark green leafy vegetables, soy products, dried fruit, and beans. Talk with your doctor to see if you need a multivitamin with iron.
5. Water: This is the most essential nutrient of all! Do not wait until you are thirsty to drink. By then, it's too late. One to two hours before exercise drink 8-16 ounces of water. During exercise drink 8-10 ounces every 10-20 minutes. If you are working out longer than 60 minutes or it is hot, drink an electrolyte solution containing sodium, potassium, and chloride, such as Gatorade or Powerade, in addition to water.

6. Pre and Post Work-Out: Make sure to drink plenty of water and eat a healthy snack that includes a carbohydrate and a protein food such as whole grain bread with peanut butter and fruit, hard boiled egg and toast, turkey sandwich, or a bagel with cream cheese and tomatoes.

Take Home Points:

- *Eat real food and avoid processed, packaged, or boxed foods
- *Eat when you are hungry
- *Drink plenty of water before, during, and after exercise
- *Drink electrolyte solution on hot days or for workouts over an hour
- *Avoid dehydrating substances such as alcohol, caffeine, and energy drinks
- *Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables
- *Talk to your doctor about vitamins or supplements you may need

Nurture and nourish your body well and treat it wisely. You are an athlete and you are amazing!

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