

EATING RIGHT!

Football is a game of strength, speed and skill – all of which can be affected by what, when and how much an athlete eats and drinks. Athletes need to apply the same effort to proper fueling as they give during practices and competition. Players sometimes neglect nutrition, which can result in poor performance.

Common Nutrition Mistakes

- > Not drinking enough fluids
- > Not eating at regular intervals
- > Eating too much protein and short-changing carbohydrates

Setting Nutrition Goals

With a little education, football players can make changes that will be felt both on and off the field. The team should set nutrition goals together, such as:

>

Drinking on a schedule

- > Refueling at half-time
- > Eating immediately after practices or games

What to Eat

Football players need carbohydrates to fuel hard-working muscles. Bread, pasta, rice, potatoes, fruits and vegetables should be the bulk of a football player's diet filling up 2/3 of the plate at every meal. Protein foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy foods, nuts, soy products and beans, are essential for good health, but are not the primary fuel source for exercise, and so should occupy only 1/3 of the plate.

All Day Fueling

Unlike professional football players who practice during the day, younger athletes don't take the field or hit the gym until after school. Since bodies don't run well on empty, eating every 3 to 4 hours is necessary to properly fuel both the body and mind.

Encourage your athletes to:

- > Eat within 1 hour of waking up.

- > Eat something at lunch.
- > Snack before practice on a sports drink, energy bar, cereal or granola bar.
- > Bring a post-exercise snack to eat before leaving the locker room. Good choices include an energy bar, bagel, crackers or fruit with a sports drink.

Drink Up!

All players benefit when the body is optimally hydrated. This is not just a game-day issue, but a daily priority. To prevent dehydration, especially in hot, humid environments, athletes need to drink often and enough. Get your athletes off to the right start:

- > Recommend sports drinks over water, because sports drinks taste great, contain electrolytes, like sodium, and may help prevent cramping.
- > Weigh players before and after practices to determine individual fluid losses and monitor them to replace every pound lost by drinking at least 20 ounces of fluid.
- > Ask athletes to bring their own sports bottles and drinks so their favorite fluid is readily available.
- > Remind athletes that spitting out fluids doesn't hydrate the body!
- > Educate players about the importance of seeing what they pee. The goal is light-colored urine and lots of it!

Football players should also eat a small meal containing at least 600 calories of carbohydrate about two hours before competition. 600 calories is the approximate amount of carbohydrate in three bananas and four slices of bread (eaten together). Players should also try to 'taper' for a few days before matches, reducing their intensity and quantity of training in order to avoid carbohydrate depletion.

During the taper and during all periods of heavy training, football players should attempt to ingest 9–10 grams of carbohydrate per kilogram of body weight (16–18 calories per pound of body weight) each day. 'Grazing' – eating two to four daily high-carbohydrate snacks in addition to three regular meals – can help players carry out this high-carbo plan successfully. However, carbohydrate is not the only nutritional concern for football players.

Fluid intake is also critically important. Various studies have shown that football players lose – through their sweat glands – from two to five litres of fluid per game. Even the lower figure could raise heart rate and body temperature during a match and might reduce running performance by about 4–5 percent for an average player. Fortunately, the sports–drink–intake plan described above – coupled with sips of sports drink during injury time–outs – can help to reduce the impact of dehydration.

Although water and carbohydrate must be taken onboard, football players don't need to worry about replacing electrolytes during play. Sweat is a dilute fluid with low concentrations of electrolytes, and most players can obtain enough electrolytes – including salt – from their normal diets. However, the presence of salt in a sports drink can enhance the absorption of water and glucose. Most commercial drinks have about the right concentration of sodium; if you're making your own beverage, you should be sure to mix about one–third tea spoon of salt and five to six tablespoons of sugar with each quart of water that you're going to be using.

After all matches, players should attempt to ingest enough carbohydrate–containing sports drink to replace all the fluid they've lost during competition. After strenuous workouts, water should also be replaced, and football athletes need to eat at least 500 calories of carbohydrate during the two hours following practice in order to maximize their rates of glycogen storage. ('Carbohydrate, Fluid, and Electrolyte Requirements of the Football Player: A Review,' *International Journal of Sport Nutrition*, vol. 4, pp. 221–236, 1994)