

Optimal Nutrition for Youth Soccer Players

Soccer is a sport that requires short, powerful bursts of energy over a long game time, and up to 6 total miles of running per game. For this reason, it is essential that soccer players adhere to a carbohydrate-rich sports diet.

The nutrition goals of the soccer player include maximizing energy levels and reaching/maintaining a healthy body weight and body composition. These goals can be achieved through consistency, timing, and planning.

Soccer Sports Nutrition 101

The optimal sports diet for soccer consists of approximately 50-60 percent of one's daily energy needs from carbohydrates, 20 percent from protein, and 25-30 percent from fat. Carbohydrates provide the purest fuel source for the athlete. Carbohydrates provide glucose and glycogen for energy before, during, and after training and competition and can be found in grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, milk, and yogurt. Carbohydrates are divided into 2 groups: complex and refined. A healthy, well-rounded sports diet emphasizes complex carbohydrates over the refined ones. Complex carbohydrates include 100 percent whole grains, dark-colored fruits and vegetables, and legumes, whereas refined carbohydrates include white flours, sugars, and sweets.

Protein is critical for building and repairing muscle tissue, strengthening the immune system, and maintaining energy levels. Protein is useful only when the athlete fuels with optimal amounts of carbohydrates. The richest sources of protein are animal products, including meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy as well as soy, a vegetable protein. Protein is also available in smaller amounts in plant foods such as beans, grains, and vegetables. A portion of protein is roughly 3-4 ounces (20-30 grams), which is about the size and thickness of a deck of cards. As long as athletes incorporate a lean protein with each meal and snack, they can rest assured that their daily protein needs are being met.

Lastly, fats help the body absorb fat-soluble vitamins (vitamins A, D, E and K), provide protection for internal organs, help regulate energy supply, and aid in cellular repair as well as mental function. Athletes are encouraged to choose the healthier, unsaturated fats including nuts, seeds, olive oil, peanut butter, avocados, fatty fish like salmon and tuna, and trans-fat free margarines over saturated fats including butter, bacon, cream cheese, sour cream, fatty meats, and whole-fat dairy products.

Performance Soccer Nutrition Rules:

*Fuel!

- Fuel 5-7 times a day: roughly 3 small meals and 2-4 mini power snacks
- Include a lean protein at each meal and snack
- Choose minimally processed carbohydrates
- Choose unsaturated fats

*Hydrate!

- Hydrate every day for health (at least 5 cups of plain water daily).
- On training and competition days, drink 2 cups before exercise, 1 cup every hour of exercise, and after exercise 2-3 cups for every pound lost. Try to minimize the fluids lost during exercise as dehydration hurts performance

*Supplement!

- Daily: Take a reputable multiple with minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants along with an omega-3 fatty acid, preferably from fish oil. Make sure the labels indicated they are USP- and GMP-approved for potency and purity.
- Every day as needed: calcium, protein powders, and sports bars
- Training and competition days: pre-workout and post-workout power snacks consisting of a carbohydrate and protein mix and glucose-electrolyte solutions that provide 6-8% carbohydrates per serving, such as Accelerade.

*Rest!

- Be consistent. Young athletes need roughly 8.5-10 hours of quality sleep a night.

Game Day Nutrition

Soccer players need to be well-fueled, but should allow adequate time for the previous meal to fully digest before competing, which varies from athlete to athlete. Some important points to keep in mind include the following:

- The pre-game meal should be high in carbohydrates and consumed 3-4 hours before the game. If the athlete chooses to fuel with a small carbohydrate-rich snack, he or she can eat 1-2 hours before game time.
- Since play is often continuous, players need to take advantage of timeouts and player substitution breaks to refuel and rehydrate with sports drinks such as Accelerade.
- Replenish glycogen stores after the game by eating a carbohydrate-rich snack with a little bit of protein.
- The optimal post-game window to refuel is within 30 minutes!

A Sample One-Day Eating Plan for a Young Soccer Player

TIME	MEAL/SNACK
6 AM	Instant breakfast with low-fat milk, Whole-wheat English Muffin with natural peanut butter, piece of fruit, water
9 AM	Sports bar or shake (<20 grams of sugar/serving), water
12 PM	Turkey Sandwich in a whole grain wrap with lettuce, tomato, avocado, and mustard; bag of carrot sticks with low-fat ranch dip, bunch of grapes, low-fat pudding cup, low-fat milk, water
3 PM	Granola bar and a glass of low-fat milk, water
5 PM	Sports bar (<20 grams of sugar per serving), water
Practice	Water (and Gatorade)
After Practice	Meal-replacement shake for the ride home and smaller portions at dinner- with an emphasis on vegetables
8/9 PM	

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