Food Choices for Peak Performance

Health and nutrition are all about choosing and decision-making. Some choices we make are better than others; but overall, we want to make more good decisions than bad ones. If a player makes bad food decisions 6 days of the week, then that one healthy pre-game meal won't do a whole lot to improve performance. Keep in mind we are changing behaviors that have taken your whole life to learn. They will take more than a day to change.

80/20 rule – Being perfect 100% of the time is never going to happen.80% is more realistic. Totally avoiding foods you like may lead to eating binges and their resulting guilt. Don't be afraid to eat the foods you like. Keep the portions small and enjoy the experience. Try to avoid eating or snacking while standing – measure out a reasonable portion and then close the package, sit down at the table, use a plate and silverware, and eat it slowly. Savor every bite. Rushing through it will leave you unsatisfied and may lead to overeating.

Eat early, eat often – Eat breakfast and eat more small meals throughout the day. Eating breakfast will keep you from playing catch-up the rest of the day. Eating breakfast will also help you make better choices at your next meal or snack. When you have that starved feeling from skipping meals, you are more likely to overeat at your next meal and choose "fast foods" that are of poor quality. Instead of big ups and downs in your blood sugar level with only three big meals each day, eating 5 or 6 smaller meals and snacks will keep energy level more steady and boost your metabolism. Think of your body and metabolism like a furnace. You want to keep warm by stoking the fire all day with smaller pieces of wood rather than burning it all at once.

Carb Window – Muscles are most receptive to replacing muscle glycogen within the first 30 to 90 minutes after a workout.

Power 12 Foods – Too often nutrition plans and the many fad diets have a negative approach and focus only on 'forbidden' foods they say you can't eat. The editors of *Men's Health Magazine* published a book titled *The Abs Diet* detailing a very sensible nutrition plan for active people. This plan takes a more positive approach by focusing on what foods you should eat.Their "Power 12" foods are:

A – Almonds, other nuts, seeds, and avocado (impostors = salted or smoked nuts)

B – Beans and legumes, lentils, peas, hummus (impostors = refried and baked beans)

S – Spinach and other green vegetables (impostors – none, unless covered in fatty cheese sauces)

D – Dairy products, fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt, cheese, and cottage cheese

I – Instant oatmeal, unsweetened and unflavored (use berries or fruits to flavor)

E – Eggs or egg beaters

T – Turkey and lean steak, chicken, or fish (impostors – sausage, bacon, ham, fatty cuts of steak)

P – Peanut butter, all natural and sugar free (impostors – mass produced sugary versions)

O – Olive oil, canola oil, peanut oil, sesame oil (impostors – other vegetable oils and margarine)

W – Whole grain breads and cereals (impostors – white bread, bagels, doughnuts)

E – Extra protein (whey) powder

R – Raspberries, other berries and fruits (impostors – sugary jellies)

Think big, start small – Overall nutrition and food choices are what count. No single food or food group can make or break our eating plan. Make changes one meal at a time. Start by adding healthy snacks or switching to healthier snacks during the day. Next, switch to a healthy breakfast or start eating breakfast if you've been skipping. Try it for one or two meals per week at first. After conquering breakfast, dinner is the next priority – make your own meal 5 nights per week. Plan all five meals in advance and shop for the whole week at one time. Lunch is probably the hardest change to make because we don't typically have the benefit of being in our own kitchen. Try to bring or make your own lunch at least 1 or 2 times per week – maybe bring some leftovers from the healthy dinner you made the night before. When you do eat out, try to pick restaurants with at least some healthy choices on the menu. Make sure at least part of your meal is nutritious. If you choose a lower quality entrée, pick healthier sides, etc.

How much? – Use portion size and food quality (i.e., pick healthier versions) to control your calories and food intake rather than eliminating entire foods. Example:red meat is OK, but instead of hamburger, choose a small leaner cut of beef and trim any excess fat. Excluding foods or entire food groups can lead to an unbalanced diet and may cut out nutrients that your body needs. For example, if you eliminate all dairy products from your diet, then you need to find substitutes that will help you get enough calcium such as fortified soy or rice milk and green leafy vegetables.

You can eat after 6:00 PM – Your body really doesn't know what time it is. It's OK to eat after 6:00, just make sure it's part of your plan and not a binge. You don't want to eat a huge meal right before going to bed, but snacks are perfectly all right and larger snacks or small meals are fine if eaten a couple hours before going to bed. Eating a large meal immediately before going to sleep may cause sleep disturbances and may not be efficiently digested and used by the body. You want to wake up feeling hungry, so the worst possible effect of late night eating is not being hungry in the morning and throwing off you whole eating plan the rest of the day.

SLOW DOWN – It takes 20 minutes before the brain recognizes that you have eaten your fill. Put down the fork between bites and chew thoroughly so you avoid overeating and your body has time to better digest foods.

Drink up – drink lots of water, fruit juice, or vegetable juice. Avoid coffee, tea, soda, and other sugary drinks. Be honest about your alcohol intake, the empty calories add up.

Variety is the spice of life – Try to include as many food groups in each meal or snack as possible. Try for at least two different food groups in each snack. For example:eat a bagel with peanut butter and banana slices, strawberries with yogurt, or pretzels and tomato juice. Eating the same foods all the time is boring and you may leave out some vital nutrients. Experiment with new foods or different preparations and seasonings. Examples of healthy snacks can be found in the table on the next page.

See the WHOLE picture – Stick with complex carbohydrates from whole grains. Bleached and enriched grains have their natural nutrients taken out and then artificial nutrients added back in later. A product labeled just as 'wheat' (e.g. wheat bread) is not the same as 'whole wheat.' Check the list of ingredients on the label and make they include the phrase *whole* wheat or *whole* oats, etc. Sweets are mostly simple sugars that often include lots of saturated fat and have few vitamins or minerals. Eating simple sugars lead to a brief high followed by a big crash.

Natural is better – Try to find natural or fresh versions of your favorite foods. Avoid processed foods that contain a lot of partially hydrogenated oils and excess saturated fat as well as high fructose corn syrup and other simple sugars. These empty calories take up space for more nutrient dense foods that can help your performance.

All things are good in moderation, including moderation – Repeat after me:fat is OK; we need fat. We just don't need a ton of it. Fat helps make us feel full and the desire for fatty foods is quickly met. Most of the time, low-fat foods may not be any better for you anyway. They often replace the fat with simple sugars, salt, and artificial or chemical fillers. They may have reduced the fat but not the calories, so when you are choosing foods, read the labels on the low-fat or non-fat products. Sometimes, picking the regular version instead of the non-fat version may actually be a better choice. Look for dairy products made from 1% or skim milk rather than those just labeled as low-fat. Again, use portion size to control your calories and foods.

High Maintenance Ordering – Control your portions by getting the added fats on the side. This includes sauces, salad dressings, spreads, mayonnaise, butter, margarine, oils, etc. You can put smaller amounts on your food or you can quickly dip your fork into the salad dressing or sauce and then use the fork to pick up a bite. You can also buy misters/sprayers for oils. Baked, grilled, broiled, poached, or steamed is better than fried.

Healthy Snacks*	
Peanut butter and jelly or banana sandwich	Soup and crackers
Trail mix (nuts, raisins, dried fruit, etc.)	Raw veggies with low-fat salad dressing or salsa
Instant oatmeal with dried fruit	Fresh fruit and pretzels or popcorn
Cereal or granola with yogurt and fruit	Fresh fruit with yogurt or cottage cheese
Banana, pumpkin, or date bread and milk	Low-fat cheese and crackers or rice cakes
Tuna fish and crackers	Pita bread with low-fat cheese
English muffin with peanut butter or almond butter	Low-fat muffin with milk, yogurt or juice
Rice cakes or crackers and hummus	Slice of pizza with vegetable toppings
Oatmeal raisin cookies or fig bars and milk	Baked potato with salsa or low-fat cheese

*Table adapted from *Endurance Sports Nutrition* by Suzanne Girard Eberle.

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