

Sports Nutrition

Sport nutrition, in simple terms is all about the right amount and type of food to obtain optimum performance in sport. Most of us will have enough energy stored in our bodies to complete a game of football or go for a 30 min jog. However in elite sport, athletes are required to put in a huge amount of training and therefore need much more energy than the average person. A sports nutritionist will advise athletes on what type of foods to eat, in what quantity and at what times.

What do athletes eat?

Athletes eat depending on how much energy they use. The worst thing that could happen to an athlete is that they run out of energy during a performance. A marathon runner for example will need to keep running for hours; therefore they would eat a high carbohydrate diet, such as pasta, rice, bread and potatoes as these foods release energy slowly and keeps the body working for longer.

A sprinter or a weight lifter will need to have powerful muscles and require a high muscle mass. Therefore in their diet they would eat a high protein diet, which is used to help repair muscle damage and allow muscles to grow bigger.

A team player such as a hockey player needs to have a balanced diet with a combination of carbohydrate for the duration of the game and protein for the sprinting within the game.

Whatever the sport, all athletes should try to get a balanced diet of carbohydrate, protein and a small amount of fat. You will often see athletes snacking on fruit, cereal bars or protein drinks. This is so they can keep up with their energy requirements for training.

Why do athletes care about their diets so much?

The analogy which is often used in sports nutrition is, that a car won't work without the right fuel. If you put diesel into an unleaded car it will not function. The same can be said about putting the wrong kind of food into your body. The body will work, but you won't get maximum performance.

Believe it or not, some athletes find it hard to digest enough food to keep up with their energy requirements. I have to say this has never been a problem for me!

It's important for athletes to have a healthy diet as it helps maintain their health and prevention of injury. Athletes are pushing their bodies to the limits on a daily basis and risk getting illness and injuries. When energy levels get low in the body, decision making becomes harder which leads to mistakes in games. Athletes also run the risk of developing cramp in the muscles if the body is not properly fuelled.

When is the best time to eat for performance?

The simple answer is whatever time suits your body best. Some athletes can digest quicker than others. There are players in my team who can literally eat a banana 5 mins before they go on the pitch. Whereas I'm someone who likes to eat a biggish meal 2.5hrs before a game- otherwise I feel sluggish and occasionally sick in a game. However if I'm doing a weights session I often have a cereal bar just prior to going into the gym. It took me many years to find out what my optimal digestion time.

Recovery

It is vital that athletes recover as quickly as possible. When in a training phase, athletes will be training every day- so it's important that the body is refuelled quickly. As a hockey player i'm often required to play in a tournament situation, where there are back to back matches. Following a game I will drink a recovery drink which has been made up of water, sugar, salt and nutrients to replenish all that has been lost through sweating. We weigh our selves after every game to see how much body weight has been lost through sweating. In humid or hot environments this can be up to 1-2kg. It is then calculated how much you should drink to ensure hydration is reached. This can be up to 3 litres.

Now don't get me wrong, athletes are very normal people, they like the odd treat here and there. However they understand the importance of good nutrition and the role it plays in reaching optimum performance. Even for people who undertake moderate exercise it's important to key an eye what food is ingested and to ensure the body is properly hydrated- all of which will lead to a healthier lifestyle.