

You Are What You Eat

Obesity is rampant in the United States. The marketing of certain food and drink combined with the sweet taste of most foods makes it hard to convince even our athletes to eat properly. This article is for around 90% of the players 8 years old and up and their parents who fix the meals or provide them. The other 10% are the very elite athletes who need the same basics but may require a more specialized nutritional plan.

A child's eating habits are usually set by the age of eight so it is imperative that their parents prepare nutritious meals and teach the child the benefits of eating with nutrition in mind.

Nutrition tends to be overlooked when time is short and players are going from one game or practice to another. Even though softball is not a high endurance sport like soccer, field hockey or cross country, proper nutrition does play a key role in many aspects of softball especially when participating in tournaments where multiple games are played in a short period to time.

I was speaking with the coach of a college team that I played frequently against and the young coach was lamenting that she didn't know why they were losing close games and just couldn't get her team over that hump to win the big games. Well, my thoughts were that maybe they shouldn't go to McDonald's for their meals. The coach likes McDonald's so that's where she takes her team for their pre and post game meals. Even though fast food restaurants are having "healthier" choices now they still are not a place to take your team. Even though occasionally going to them will not hurt anyone, my theory is that they probably eat that way when they are on their own so I wasn't going to contribute to it while they were in my care.

Check your player's fitness level and their dietary habits. I always told my players that life is not fair and your body type might be different than another's. There are three body types: a mesomorph is an athletic type person who could stay in shape or could gain weight if eating more calories than they are burning off, an ectomorphs who is a tall, skinny person who has trouble gaining weight and the other is an endomorphs who is a round person who gains weight easily and has a hard time losing weight. Genetics are genetics and no one can change that fact. But eating habits can be changed. If someone is overweight, help them understand what to do and what changes they can make with their nutritional habits.

Diets do not work--change to substituting good foods for bad foods

The very basics for nutrition are the following:

- It takes 3500 calories to gain or lose a pound. Unfortunately, it is way easier to take in 3500 than expend 3500 calories. A normal candy bar is around 350 calories while walking a mile at 3.5 mph burns around 100 calories and hitting a bucket of balls or fielding an occasional grounder in a game burns way less than that. So, it is a lot easier to take in more calories than we burn.
- Muscle does weigh more than fat so instead of going by a scale, find out what your body mass index (BMI) is and do the look in a mirror test.
- Aerobic exercises (exercises that use oxygen-soccer, cross country, etc.) burn more calories than anaerobic exercises (weight training, softball, baseball, etc.)
- Dehydration is common, if you drink only when you are thirsty, you are probably dehydrated. Your urine should be pale yellow not dark yellow.

Fluids are essential for successful performances by players and it is a must that an athlete stay hydrated before, after and during training sessions and games. The loss of fluids can affect the ability to perform and compete especially if practices and games are long and in hot, humid conditions.

Remember:

- Water is fine if exercising for less than 90 minutes. Sports drinks are good for exercising over 90 minutes or for games/practices that are extremely hot and/or humid.
- Sports drinks are not just for hydration but provide carbohydrate energy and replace electrolytes. However,

they are widely overused. Too many are drinking them instead of water when they are only moderately exercising. There is usually a vending machine outside every fitness center and people are drinking them more for the taste or because right now they think it is the "in" thing to do than the help it may give. Biggest problem in drinking these when they are not needed is the calorie content. They are even higher in calories than drinking a soda. Save them for the conditions when they are needed the most.

- Coffee, tea and juices don't count towards hydration, they dehydrate the body instead. Drink these in moderation.
- The new energy drinks flooding the market are quick fixes and could become addictive. Stay away from them.

2-Fuel yourself regularly--eat four to six smaller meals a day and start with eating a good, nutritionally sound breakfast.

Remember:

- Start your day with foods like fresh fruit, low fat yogurt, 100% whole wheat bread/English muffin with a nut butter like peanut butter, low fat cheese, oatmeal (not instant), whole grain cereals with low fat milk, blueberries, almonds or walnuts.
- Eat lunch to stay fueled for the afternoon practices or games with foods like turkey/chicken on 100% whole wheat with tomatoes and lettuce and very small amounts of condiments.
- Refuel after practices or games with complex carbohydrate foods and fluids. Eat foods like sweet potatoes, vegetables, pastas with tomato sauce and fruit.
- Eating complex carbohydrates after hard exercise keeps you from feeling chronically fatigued and prepares you for the next day.

3-Carbohydrates--active individuals should eat 55-65% of their daily intake of calories as carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates are the preferred fuel of the muscles. These consist of starches: pasta, fruits, dried peas and beans, whole grain cereals and breads, squash and sweet potatoes. Complex carbs contain significant amounts of fiber, will help guard against disease and help maintain a healthy weight. Simple carbs are good tasting but will help add to weight gain and will not provide the health benefits as complex carbs. Simple carbs are candy, white breads, pastries, typical kid's cereals and any other dessert type items.

Remember:

- Choose a whole grain/whole wheat bagel/English muffin with nut butter instead of donuts. Enriched whole wheat is not 100% whole wheat so choose the latter.
- Choose tuna on whole wheat bread instead of chips and dip as a snack
- Choose whole grain cereal with non-fat milk, nuts and blueberries instead of sugar cereal with 2% milk and a fruit bar
- Choose salmon, turkey or veggie burger on whole grain instead of a beef burger on a white bun or skip the bun altogether
- Choose fresh fruit dipped in natural peanut butter instead of cake or cookies
- Choose non instant oatmeal instead of bacon and eggs

Carbs are great if you are active but if not, you will gain weight because you are not burning those calories off and they will be stored as fat.

4-Proteins--lean proteins help build muscles, organs, enzymes and oxygen carrying hemoglobin. Good sources of protein are yogurt, milk, cheese, nuts and lean meats. Active individuals should eat protein for 10-15% of their daily caloric intake.

Remember:

- Veggie pizza on thin whole wheat crust instead of a meat lover's pizza with thick white crust

- Lean beef instead of marbled beef
- Turkey or chicken instead of red meat
- Nut butter (peanut, almond) instead of butter and jelly
- Hard boiled or poached eggs instead of fried eggs
- Low fat yogurt instead of regular yogurt
- Fat free milk instead of whole milk or 2%

5-Fats--there are good fats and there are bad fats and even though it can be a good energy source and adds flavor and texture to foods, they still have a ton of calories. In eating a balanced diet, getting enough essential fat will be achieved. Eating fast foods, highly processed foods, meats marbled with fat and simple (sugary foods) carbohydrates will cause too much of an intake in the diet.

Athletes should incorporate a variety of natural fats into their daily diet, such as nuts, nut butters, olive oil and seeds, cold water fish, olives and avocados. Large amounts of saturated fat from animal products (meat/dairy) and trans fats (hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated oils that are in many packaged products) should be avoided. Feed your body with good foods versus something quick that is processed or full of fat. You want you eat so putting those type foods in your body will produce excess weight and low nutrition.

6-Healthy Habits--try to eat a variety of good foods to get all the nutrients you need. Processed food is low in quality and does not provide what you need nutritionally.

Fresh food is always the best with frozen coming in a close second (Frozen is fresh that is immediately frozen without a lot of processing). Canned foods are not as good nutritionally sound and processed food along with fast foods and those come in last.

Learn to read a food label, almost all foods and restaurants have the information needed to make an informed choice of what is good to eat and what is not. Use that information!

What to do:

Gaining weight is a reality during a season because of the lack of time to prepare nutritious meals and the grabbing of something that is quick to eat on the run. So, heed these suggestions:

- Only eat fried foods, snack chips, etc if you exercised aerobically that day
- Only order dessert after you finish the meal and then split it with someone
- Always include a fruit and a vegetable with your meals
- Eat whole wheat/whole grain instead of white
- Fill half of your plate with fruit or vegetables
- Only eat a sweet snack or a salty snack in the afternoon if you eat a piece of fruit first
- Drink a glass of water before every meal or snack
- Never eat in front of the TV
- Eat a piece of fruit on the way to school everyday
- Save desserts for the weekend
- Use a smaller plate
- Use tall glasses instead of short and wide ones (pour in less)
- At a restaurant, put half in a to go box before eating (portions are too big at a restaurant)
- Use 1/2 size zip lock bags versus normal size one (put in less)
- Keep the main serving dishes on the stove not the table (have to get up to get more, less access)
- Avoid greasy foods
- Choose grilled instead of fried even with burgers since grease will remain on the fried
- Eat smaller portions and eat more times during the day--4 to 5 versus traditional 3
- No alcohol, major calories
- Realize coffee, tea and soda all dehydrates the body, don't use on game day
- NEVER SKIP A GOOD BREAKFAST-No donuts though or cereal that is high in sugar

Do not stop eating or skip meals, your body will think you are starving and your metabolism will slow down which will not burn the calories.

The higher the metabolism, the more calories are burned. The lower the metabolism, the less calories are burned.