

## The best food for the young athlete

By Dev K. Mishra, M.D.

Here's a revelation: eat the least processed food you can find. Right, that's not a revelation. You've heard it before but it's not an easy thing to do when feeding the typical American teenage athlete. But it can be done, especially if you try to stick to the 80/20 rule that I'll outline below.

There are a lot of different diets and recommendations around but the number of choices is very confusing, and frankly, I'm not sure all of them are safe for young athletes. What we're trying to do with a young athlete is make them as healthy as possible to improve their sport performance -- but more importantly I believe that we can set them up with good habits for a lifetime of healthy eating.

What I'm talking about here is eating as close to natural and minimally processed foods as possible. Some nutritionists call this "eating close to the ground" and other call it "eating clean," etc., and it means stepping back to the old days of eating the most nutrient-packed and least processed foods you can find.

It means shopping on the edges of the grocery store and not down the middle of the store in the pre-packaged frozen foods section. The nutrients, vitamins, and minerals found in natural foods will almost always lead to an improved health profile, improved performance, decreased body fat if the child is overweight, and increased energy levels.

### Examples of good food choices for the young athlete

It's hard shopping for young athletes because they can be pretty set in their ways and are heavily influenced by their friends -- who may be eating poorly. Here are just a few examples of what you should aim for in the food choices:

#### Fruits and Vegetables

- \* Apples, bananas, berries, kiwis, oranges
- \* Dried fruits as snacks
- \* 100 percent fruit smoothies from places like Jamba Juice
- \* Leafy greens such as kale, spinach, collard
- \* Beans and lentils
- \* Avocado

#### Meat, Fish, Nuts, and Dairy

- \* Lean meats: chicken, turkey, lean beef

- \* Fish: tuna, salmon
- \* Nuts: almonds, walnuts, macadamia, pecans, cashews
- \* Dairy: low fat milk, low fat yogurt, eggs

#### Bread, Cereal, and Grains

- \* Bread: 100% whole wheat or whole grain, rye, sourdough
- \* High fiber cereal such as Kashi or Cheerios.
- \* Oatmeal
- \* Couscous

Let's get real, kids will be kids: the 80/20 rule

The guidelines above represent the ideal situations but the practical matter is that it's impossible to have a young athlete follow these suggestions all the time. That's where the 80/20 rule comes into play.

The 80/20 rule means that 80 percent of the time you stick with the healthy eating rules and 20 percent of the time you're allowed to "cheat" and stray from the ideal. When one of your teammates has a birthday and cupcakes are the post-game "snack"-- go for it and enjoy it with your friends! Having a (very) occasional burger, fries, and soda? OK, then do the best you can with your other meals that week.

Be realistic and do the best you can, when you can. You'll live a healthier life for the effort and it will allow you to perform at your best during games.

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