

Nutrition for children involved in sport

What food does my child need to eat to support their training?

When considering the types of food needed by child-athletes, a good starting point is to consider carbohydrate, protein, and fat. The amount required of each of these nutrients will be determined by the demands of training and by the body mass of your child. Once these values (i.e. training demands and body mass) are obtained, a wide range of foods can be consumed to meet the demand. The amount provided by individual food items can be obtained from food labels or quick guides which can help you customise meals to the likes and dislikes of your child.

Is my child drinking enough?

The importance of hydration is well publicised but it is important to be aware that you can consume too much and too little. Unfortunately there is a wide variation in sweat loss between athletes and consequently it is difficult for guidelines to specify the exact amount of fluid needed by all individuals in all situations. Instead you should encourage your child to monitor their own hydration status using some simple techniques. By monitoring their own status, they can then individualise and refine their own hydration strategies.

Does my child need to consume a sports drink?

Sports drinks typically comprise of water, carbohydrate, and sodium. Although sports drinks are promoted to support performance, not everyone needs or will benefit from consuming a sports drink. Typically you should consider both the duration of your child's exercise as well as their goals (e.g., training adaptation versus competition performance).

Should my child use dietary supplements?

Currently all athletes (children and adults) are encouraged to adopt a food first approach. Current guidelines suggest that in the absence of a diagnosed nutrient deficiency, it is inappropriate for young athletes to take dietary supplements for performance enhancement. However, if you are considering the use of dietary supplements, you should 1) assess the need, 2) assess the risk, 3) assess the consequences, and 4) minimise the risk.

Does my child need to use a vitamin or mineral supplement?

If your child is deficient in a vitamin or mineral, there will be a benefit of increasing intake. But if your child is not deficient, increasing the intake will have little effect on performance. In the absence of a diagnosed nutrient deficiency, a food first approach is the preferred option for athletes to meet the nutritional demands of their sport. In fact a variety of foods (not just fruit and vegetables) provide a wide range of vitamins and minerals and therefore supplementation is not considered essential.