

Sports Nutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) is the nation's largest group of food and nutrition professionals. At their annual convention (Oct 2024; Minneapolis), members presented research and updates that might be of interest to sports-active people. Here is a sampling.

- US teens aged 14-18 have the lowest Healthy Eating Index Score (49 out of 100) due to their high intake of sweetened beverages and sweet baked goods. How about encouraging more water, bagels with peanut butter, and bean burritos for easy but healthier options?
- Athletes commonly over-eat protein. This raises environmental as well as health concerns. Insects are a sustainable source of protein—though quickly labeled *disgusting*. The most palatable form is powdered insects (flour). Will athletes one day embrace insect-based protein products?
- Female D-1 soccer players commonly eat too little carbohydrate. Analysis of food records from 12 players suggests they ate the recommended amount of fat and protein but 10 of 12 players fell short of the recommended 2.5-4.5 g carb/lb/day. (That's at least 1,200 to 2,150 calories a day from carb-rich grains, fruits and veggies for a 120-pound player. Those athletes could perform so much better if they were to enjoy more carbs...
- The body's response to sugary foods differs between sedentary and fit people. Exercise enhances muscles' ability to quickly take up glucose, potentially offsetting "sugar spikes" after consumption of high-sugar foods. A good reason to take a nice walk after a sweet treat!
- Athletes often complain about intestinal discomfort and GI distress. Gut issues can be triggered by school, work & athletic stress, disordered eating, anxiety and depression. Consulting with a sports dietitian (RD CSSD) can help athletes reduce, if not resolve, gut issues.
- Athletes with gut issues might benefit from taking digestive enzymes (such as FODZYME, Bean-O, LactAid pills). A study with 96 participants (average age-57) reports more than half (52%) had a positive response from FODZYME. They suffered less abdominal pain, bloating, gas, constipation, diarrhea, vomiting, and nausea—plus had better mental wellbeing as well as quality of life.
- Food allergies, food sensitivities, and/or autoimmune diseases that limit dietary options are challenging for many athletes, particularly those in college. They express frustration, annoyance, isolation, and increased anxiety—especially when dining staff are unable to confidently answer their questions. Their overall college experience gets negatively impacted; they can be excluded from on-campus events that offer free food. They commonly have to prepare and carry enough food for the entire day, and/or face limited options when dining out. Students may worry about getting sick after eating on campus, leading to class absences, trips to the doctor, and the difficulty of making up missed assignments. Helping this population on campuses is important so they can meet their nutritional needs plus have less anxiety.

Nutrition News from A.N.D.

- Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs) is a syndrome stemming from consuming inadequate food to meet daily energy expenditure. This deficit impairs athletes' health and performance. They are at increased risk for eating disorders/disordered eating. Athletes, coaches and health professionals alike need REDs education, particularly in school sports settings where REDs signs and symptoms are prevalent. Consider organizing a team workshop with your local sports dietitian.
- Female athletes experience weight bias from the social expectations they should *look feminine* and have an *ideal body*. Weight bias presents as 1) pressure to conform to certain body standards, 2) comments about weight or appearance, 3) unequal treatment compared to leaner peers. Despite being classified as normal weight, almost half of female athletes reported having experienced weight discrimination. This needs to change so that *strong and powerful* replaces the quest to be *lighter, leaner*.
- A study with 70 collegiate females reports a disconnect between actual and perceived body fatness. Distorted body image—an unrealistic view of oneself—increases the risk of restrictive dieting and starve-binge eating patterns to lose body fat. Female athletes: please understand that some body fat is necessary for overall health!
- Many athletes with eating disorders/disordered eating feel ashamed of this dysfunction and fear stigma associated with having an eating disorder. Unfortunately, this can hinder their willingness to seek help and delay their recovery. Athletes: if you have overcome food issues, please talk openly about your recovery. You just might make a difference in someone's life.
- Tik-Tok can easily trigger disordered eating attitudes and behaviors. Don't go there! Moms can also be very influential. A mother who makes disparaging comments about her own body can trigger the development of an eating disorder in her daughter. (A mother can also be the principal source of support during recovery.)
- A light-colored morning urine signals adequate hydration. Athletes in Lycra need not avoid pre-exercise water, fearing it will *make their stomach stick out*. A fear, not a fact!
- Clearly, we need more science-based nutrition education. High school students may miss out because of lack of funding. One school solved that problem by partnering with nutrition graduate students who worked together with student athletes to figure out what topics were of interest (basic nutrition, game-day fueling & recovery, sport supplement benefits and concerns, and game-day meal planning) and then created a class that met once a week before school (the athlete's suggestion) for four weeks. The 35 athletes were empowered with knowledge—and the grad students appreciated the real-world teaching experience.

Nancy Clark MS RD CSSD counsels both fitness exercisers and competitive athletes in the Boston-area (617-795-1875). Her best-selling *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* is a popular resource. Visit NancyClarkRD.com for more information.