**Sports Nutrition for Junior Athletes**

**Source: Bharti Sapra, Nutrition Blogger**

Carbohydrates are essential in the diet for Junior Athlete for building muscles and gaining substantial energy. Approximately 55% of a junior athlete’s total daily calories should come from carbohydrate as it is the preferred fuel for the athlete’s performance.

**Foods that are rich in carbohydrates are**bread, cereal products, pasta (the original one), rice, fruits, sweet potatoes, oatmeal, starchy vegetables (corns, pumpkins, potatoes), calcium-rich dairy food i.e. yoghurt, soy milk, cheese, etc.

**2. Proteins –**

Encourage junior athletes to include protein-rich food in their diet as it is necessary for building, maintaining and repairing muscle and other body tissue. Protein provides essential amino acids to grow muscles.

**Some protein-rich foods are**Yogurt, cottage cheese, eggs, milk, chickpeas, kidney beans, fish chicken breast, lentils, green peas, mixed seeds (sunflower seeds, sesame, pumpkin and poppy seeds), Quinoa (these are sprouted seeds which nearly has doubled protein content as much as in other grains and contain all 9 amino acids that our body need to build muscles).

**A word of caution**: Moms you need to monitor your young athlete’s intake of proteins. Because less intake can lead to its deficiency and more intake can lead to dehydration, weight gain and calcium loss.

#### ****3. Iron –****

Moms, keep a constant check on iron content also as its role is to carry oxygen to all different parts of the body.

**Iron-rich foods are**meat, chicken, dried fruits and green leafy vegetables.

#### ****4. Dairy products –****

It provides 10 essential vitamins and minerals to support young athlete’s growth and training demands. It includes all good nutrients like **carbohydrates, proteins, glow nutrients such as calcium, potassium, magnesium, zinc and more.**

#### ****5. Sports Drinks –****

They are equally important as the diet is as these drinks provide the energy**.**Diluted juice is another option but avoids sugary drinks which can upset the stomach. Soft drinks which have glycogen can be considered as a good option. You can also give ORS solution as it is full of electrolytes and fluids and replenishes the body well.

#### ****6. Calcium and Vitamin D –****

As we all know calcium helps in building strong bones, teeth and for actual absorption of calcium the body requires Vitamin D (which can be naturally gained from sun exposure by walking in the early morning sunshine for 5 to 10 minutes).

**Calcium-rich foods are**all dairy products, green leafy vegetables like broccoli, kale, etc.

**Vitamin D rich foods include**fatty fish like Tuna and salmon, dairy products, orange juice, soy milk and cereals, cheese, eggs yolks etc.

**Certain foods that Young Athletes should be specifically eating**

* **Poultry or fish –**These form a great lean source of protein containing all essential amino acids essential for performing vital functions like muscle maintenance etc.
* **Milk, yoghurt or cheese**– a great source of calcium or complete protein essential for muscle recovery etc.
* **Banana, pomegranate, oranges etc.**– fruits are essential as they help in reducing inflammation and muscle recovery
* **Corn, peas, potatoes etc.**– starchy vegetables are essential for an athlete as they provide constant energy to the body

**Ideas for healthy snacks and lunches to fuel an athlete’s performance**

* **Granola bars-**This snack is a great source of fibre and protein essential in muscle maintenance, etc. fulfilling the cravings without deviating from a healthy diet and is a great source of providing energy food for kids or energy snacks for kid athletes.
* **Chicken breast with rice-**A great meal packed with protein and carbohydrates, which are really essential for an athlete or person with so much physical activity.
* **Popcorn**– Popcorn is the healthiest snack lowering risk of heart diseases, diabetes etc.

**How to develop healthy eating habits?**

* Instead of 3 strict meals, eat 5 to 6 balanced meals including snacks
* Control portion size or count calories by monitoring the food labels etc.
* Avoid foods containing empty calories or no nutrition

**Benefits of eating a healthy diet:**

A balanced diet provides vital vitamins and minerals vital in boosting immunity, health development, protection against diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, some form of cancer, help in a lower risk of injury and performing better when it comes to athletes etc. . .

**Shake ideas for Kids:**

* **Kale banana smoothie-**this combination is filled with calcium, vitamin A, K etc and will provide instant energy to kids or junior athletes
* **Papaya smoothie**–  as papaya is rich in vitamin c, vitamin a, minerals, fibre and antioxidants, this smoothie is a great option for kid athletes
* **Berry and tofu shake-**this shake will provide antioxidants, vitamins and protein making a great protein shake for kid athletes

**Energy requirement for Kids:**

Energy requirement for a kid athlete keeps increasing with age for ex- an athlete of 9-13 years of age require around 2000-2600 calories which increases to around 2800-3200 calories in 14-18 years of age.

**Some Important things to remember:**

**Before practicing any sport –**

* There should be a gap of one hour between the food intake and practicing any sport.

**During practicing any sport –**

* Junior athletes should replenish lost hydration stores during and after a competition or a heavy workout. Basically, water is required to hydrate junior athletes for the activities that last less than 60 minutes.
* However, during longer activities, sports beverages that provide 6%–8% carbohydrate will help rehydrate and replenish electrolyte stores in them.

**After practicing any sport –**

* Recovery drinks, protein bars and fruits like bananas include potassium prevent muscle cramps and helps in recovering the body after a workout.
* After practicing the game immediately give your child proteins i.e. eggs (boiled ones) or chocolate milk that helps to relax blood vessels and helps oxygen-rich blood to reach the muscles.

**If their nutritional needs are not fulfilled children will show signs of:**

* Fatigue
* Lack of muscle build up
* Weaken immune system

Thus, all Junior Athletes need to eat balanced meals and have a healthy diet.

**Note:** You can also give protein powder to children such as GRD Protein, Protein X, etc. after consulting your doctor. But as per my opinion, it’s always better giving direct natural protein (in the form food).