

# Sports Nutrition for Children On the Go

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**H**aving kids in sports means life gets even busier. Driving to practices and attending many games and weekend out-of-town tournaments leaves little time for meal planning, let alone snack planning, for a growing child.

Children competing in sports need not only healthy meals, but also well-planned snacks before, during and after the competition or heavy practice. Despite their best intentions, parents may be challenged by limited concession stand options (or closed concession stands); too many or not enough restaurant choices; not enough time to plan, shop, prepare and serve a meal; and picky children.

Sports nutritionists recommend a balance of nutrients for pre-game, post-game and between-meal planning for all athletes, including children. Carbohydrate foods, adequate protein, moderate fat and plenty of fluids must be provided so kids can play their best, avoid injury related to dehydration or a low fuel tank, and continue to grow and develop. Consider a game plan that includes a well-developed meal formula involving parents, coaches, schools and, of course, the child to be sure all nutrition goals can be achieved before, during and after the game.

## Meal the night before

If a big game, or even an all-day tournament, is being held the next day, plan the pre-game supper ahead of time, especially if traveling out of town. Call ahead or check <http://healthydiningfinder.com>. Many North Dakota communities have listings on this registered dietitian-designed Web site. Have the entire team meet at a restaurant serving healthier options and call the restaurant ahead of time to let it know what time your “mob” of players and parents will arrive. Communicate ahead of time to parents/players about suggested menu recommendations, such as baked chicken, plain baked potato, steamed vegetables, side salad, bread/rolls and reduced-fat milk.

Players should avoid deep-fried, greasy, breaded foods the day before a big tournament to avoid an upset stomach the next morning, especially for an early morning game. If a pizza place is the only option, skip the fatty meats, such as pepperoni and sausage, and see if the team may

be adventuresome enough to try lean Canadian bacon and pineapple, veggie or even plain cheese pizza. Breadsticks with marinara sauce are OK, but skip the greasy, buttery dipping sauces. Also, encourage a side salad and reduced-fat milk. Milk is the “new” sports drink; it’s full of minerals that athletes – especially adolescents – lose through sweat.

Hanging out by the swimming pool at the hotel is fun, but skip the chips and plan ahead. Pack veggie/ranch dip trays, chunked fresh fruit with marshmallow cr me dip and a variety of watery beverages or juice. Caffeine should be avoided after dinner so athletes get enough sleep.

## Day of the game or during the tournament

Avoid a fatty breakfast and stick to kid favorites: cold cereal, juice/fruit and reduced-fat milk. High-fiber cereals may cause cramping, so avoid large portions of cereals such as Raisin Bran if the kids have a morning game. Sausage, bacon, doughnuts and other hotel restaurant foods may result in unplanned bathroom trips during the morning game. Fat is slow to empty from the stomach. Don’t ever try new foods the day of a long or high-intensity tournament; stick with tried-and-true foods familiar to the child.

Packing healthy snacks on the road can be challenging, so often parents and players rely on concession stands at the soccer, volleyball or hockey tournament. Favorite offerings include hot dogs, nachos and taco-in-a-bag. All of these popular snacks are relatively high in fat and are associated with not only an upset stomach in young athletes, but also fatigue, if the athlete isn’t getting enough carbohydrate from other sources.

Also, players need protein for recovery from the impact and other wear and tear from sports. An average hot dog on a white bun has less than 10 grams of protein and more than half the calories from fat. Nachos with “cheese” sauce contain even less protein and an even higher





percentage from fat, and that taco-in-a-bag has more than one-half of the calories from fat. Players will perform better with foods that contain less than one-third of the calories from fat. They need up to about 1 gram of protein per pound of body weight. In other words, a growing teenage boy would need more than 100 grams of protein. That's quite a few hot dogs.

Tell your school officials that sloppy joes or build-your-own tacos (on plain tortilla shells) are options that would be appreciated for better concession stand choices. Volunteer to participate on the concession stand committee so your voice can be heard. Be sure the offerings include vegetables, such as fine-chopped onion, chunked fresh tomatoes, dark green leafy lettuce and salsa on the side. Also, apples, oranges, bananas, popcorn, chili (with beans), soft pretzels (without cheese sauce) or even homemade oatmeal cookies or rice krispy bars containing peanut butter or peanuts would be good options. Yogurt; bottled orange juice; real grape juice; 1 percent or skim, plus chocolate skim, milk; dried fruits, nuts or trail mix; sorbet frozen bars; or even deli sandwiches or burgers with onion, lettuce and tomato

options are realistic, healthier concession stand options.

Food safety rules should be adhered to at all times. Children who are overtraining, with lowered immune systems, may be particularly vulnerable to viruses and other bugs related to cross-contamination, uncovered coughs and sneezes, and unwashed hands.

Keep in mind that too much of a good thing may not be good for children (high-fiber foods such as nuts and raisins should be limited to about a handful per day). Chips that are not fried are still chips and are very limited in protein, vitamins and minerals.

If the concession stand cannot offer healthier options, plan ahead and have parents take turns buying foods for the entire team, such as "brick pack" orange juices, single-pack snacks such as trail mix, and peanut butter/jelly sandwiches. Have fun with it and make festive, player name-labeled "treat bags," but skip the candy, sweet rolls, doughnuts, etc.

Sports beverages are optional. Juice and milk contain carbohydrate and electrolytes, plus nutrition, not found in all sports drinks, but variety encourages kids to drink, so any beverage is preferable to none.

For more information about a healthy school environment, visit this Web site: [www.fns.usda.gov/TN/Healthy/changing.html](http://www.fns.usda.gov/TN/Healthy/changing.html)

