

Profile of a Swimmer's Snacking Style

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By Jill Castle, MS, RDN

As a mom and a dietitian, I get a lot of questions about snacking, especially for the athlete. “What’s a healthy snack?” and “How do I handle my child’s snacking habits?” are common ones. Truth be told, how the swimmer snacks and what he chooses is as much about personality, environment and opportunity as it is about nutrition. Some of the more common snacking scenarios parents face with their swimmers are:

The Starving-After-Practice Snacker

This swimmer enters the car or home, starving and about to die if he doesn’t get some food fast. I encourage parents to rewind the day, and look at the child’s actual intake at lunch, and even breakfast. It may have been mediocre. There may even be evidence: leftovers in the lunchbox, or a half eaten bowl of cereal in the morning. When swimmers eat inadequately at the beginning and middle of the day, they may be very hungry when they return home after a day of school and swim practice.

Remedy: Encourage your swimmer to “front-load”—eat a hearty breakfast and lunch including a variety of food groups and a good protein source.

Example: cereal + milk + fruit + toast + nut butter; egg + cheese + ham + English muffin + 4 oz. 100% fruit juice.

The Never-Full Snacker

Within an hour after a meal, this swimmer is hungry! Several reasons may contribute to this scenario, such as not eating enough food at mealtime, eating the wrong foods (nutrient-poor foods aren’t nutritious or satisfying enough to carry a swimmer 3-4 hours until the next meal), or a ‘habit of asking’ rather than true hunger. Whichever the reason, take a critical look at meal schedules, the food strategy, and the food balance of meals and snacks.

Remedy: Get back on a regular schedule (3 meals + 1-3 snacks depending on swimmer’s age and activity level). Boost the balance of food and nutrients, erring on the side of whole, healthy and nutritious. Don’t let the nutrient-poor foods crowd out the good stuff.

Example: Child and Teen Swimmers: 3 meals + 2-3 snacks using real food from grain, meat/non-meat protein foods, fruit, veggie, milk/non-milk and healthy fat groups.

The Take-It-or-Leave-It Snacker

Some swimmers aren’t big on snacking, or may prefer to graze, nibbling through the day and saving their appetite for meals. This tends to be an eating personality or style within the swimmer.

Remedy: Make sure to offer nutritious snacks, and if not eaten, boost the main meals with extra options and let your swimmer self-regulate his appetite. Most swimmers will eat to match their calorie requirements if given the opportunity and plenty of wholesome food.

The ‘I Love My Junk’ Snacker

Some swimmers succumb to readily available snacks in their pool and school environment, which may be processed foods instead of fresh foods, sweets rather than naturally sweetened items, and fried chips or fries over baked foods. These snack foods can easily take over the swimmer’s diet, contributing a significant amount of empty calories. Contrary to popular belief, you can re-program this!

Remedy: First, adopt a guideline that outlines how many ‘junk food items’ the swimmer can have each day with a maximum of 1 or 2 per day. This way, favorite foods are not completely eliminated, which backfires anyway, but limited to a reasonable amount. Second, point out which foods have a limit (e.g., desserts). Third, let your swimmer have a say in which ‘junk foods’ he will choose for the day. Congratulations! You’ve just negotiated a happy middle ground-- one that allows some ‘junk,’ but sets a limit.

Examples of Fun Foods: soda, cookies, candy, pie, cake, donuts, chips, and French fries. Limit two per day which might be a donut after morning practice and dessert after dinner.

The Healthy Snacker

This is the swimmer and eater we are all trying to develop! One who chooses to eat wholesome, real foods at snack time, most of the time. A swimmer who doesn’t go overboard with too much food or too many empty calories, and who listens to his body, eats mindfully and appreciates his own hunger and fullness.

Target: Stay on course with timing of snacks, a variety of foods, and a healthy balance of nutritious food. If you get side-tracked, check the solutions above, and get back on track.

What kind of snacking style do you have?

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