

How to Get Young Swimmers to Eat Well

By Jill Castle, MS, RD

Parents and coaches want their swimmers to feel good, eat well and perform to their best ability. But that's not always easy to accomplish when you have growing bodies, different food preferences and developmental influences to consider.

At a recent swim meet, I heard a variety of food complaints from parents:

"Sarah didn't eat at all during the meet!"

"Every time I saw Sam, he was at the concession stand eating fruit snacks. He had at least 3 bags this afternoon!"

"Emily had a stomachache all morning. I think she ate too much for breakfast."

Parents are up against a wide variety of eating challenges as their swimmers grow. For example, 8-year-old Josh is a selective eater. He wants the same thing to eat every day, and it's often a processed food item.

Fourteen-year-old Kate is hungry all the time, and prefers snacks to meals. And 17 year-old Max drives through the fast-food establishment several days each week on the way home from practice.

Knowing what to feed a swimmer is challenging enough, but even when all the nutrition ducks are in a row, getting a swimmer to make the right food choices is a whole different battle.

So how can swimmers be encouraged to eat well?

Set up a Healthy Food Environment: Parents are the "nutritional gatekeepers." That is, they control the majority of food that gets purchased, stocked and prepared in the home. They also control how frequently the family eats together, dines out, visits fast food joints, and the purse strings (the money). As swimmers age, parents have less control over these factors, which is why it's important to establish a nutritious food environment early on. If healthy foods are available at home, the swimmer will be more likely to eat them.

Encourage Fueling: Swimmers who want to perform their best need to have nutrition on board. It makes a difference! Swimming on an empty stomach, a tummy full of sugar or fried foods, or an overly full stomach will impact pace, comfort level and endurance. Find the right amount and type of food to best suit the body, whether a banana on the morning of competition, or a bagel with peanut butter.

Tap into Developmental Stage: Each developmental milestone is different. For example, during the school-age years, kids are interested in learning new skills. Teaching them how to cook and the basics of nutrition is not only developmentally appropriate, it allows a natural way to explore food and learn. During the teen years, the mind is more capable of understanding complex nutrition topics, like how the body uses food during exercise, and explaining these topics will help to build ownership and responsibility with caring for nutritional needs. Remember, though, teens are also risk-takers and love to experiment with new things (even unproductive dieting!), so keep the conversation about healthy nutrition going.

Set the Water Rules: During competition weekends, set a "no junk food" policy (no candy, no chips, etc). This can be a team or family rule and sets the tone and manner of competition. Consider a training diet rule as well, such as "indulgences on the weekends only."

Stick with a Plan: Eating tends to fall apart when there is no plan. When swimmers come to a meet without any snacks, they go to the concession stand. When they don't have water, they go to the vending machine. When pre-competition meals aren't planned, swimmers may not get a good balance of everything they need. While it may seem hard to get a plan going, the reality is a plan makes everything easier.