

NPY Gators Nutrition:

Nutrition Tips for Swimmers

**The Importance of Eating Right**

Many people don’t think about the importance of a healthy diet when it comes to their children’s sports performance. Often times, not eating enough or not eating the right kinds of foods can lead to fatigue or not being able to do their best. Here is a quick guideline for balanced food intake for young athletes, along with carbohydrate, protein and healthy fat recommendations.

**Carbohydrates** are the body’s preferred fuel source for athletic performance. About half of a young athlete’s total daily food intake should come from healthy carbohydrates.

**Examples:** Whole grain bread and pasta, oatmeal, fruits and vegetables

*(Note that cupcakes, cookies, and candy are carbohydrates too, but these carbs are ‘empty calories’ and don’t provide any nutritional value. They can cause a spike in energy followed by a ‘crash’ where energy and responsiveness drop below starting levels.)*

**Protein** is an essential part of a young athlete’s diet and is necessary for building, maintaining and repairing muscle and other body tissues. Young athletes need to consume enough protein each day to maintain body weight, grow, and keep protein stores in balance. About a quarter of daily food intake should be lean protein.

**Examples:** Chicken, fish, eggs, yogurt, beans

**Healthy fats** are also an important part of children’s diet. A quarter of children’s food intake should come from healthy fats. Low-fat foods are good alternatives, but *non*-fat foods are often full of added sugar and/or sodium to make them taste better.

**Examples:** nuts, olives, avocados, hummus, cooking with olive and canola oil, foods containing unsaturated fats (check food labels)

*(Note that saturated fats found in fried and processed foods should be limited.)*

**The Importance of Water**

It is critical that young athletes drink enough water. Dehydration can lead to fatigue or cramps during exercise as well as irritability. Not getting enough water can be a greater risk for kids than for adults for two reasons: (1) children experience greater heat stress and heat accumulation during exercise; and (2) because of their smaller bodies, children absorb heat more readily than do adults.

Signs of dehydration in children include (but are not limited to): dark urine, small volume of urine, muscle cramps, reduced sweating and headaches.

Child and adolescent athletes should replenish with water during and after a competition or a practice. Be aware that children do not instinctively drink enough fluids to replace lost stores, and the body’s need for fluids occurs before thirst drives the urge to replenish those lost fluids.  During strenuous activities lasting 60 minutes or less, such as swim practices and at meets (cumulative events time), water is all that is needed to hydrate young athletes. Most sports drinks contain high amounts of sugar that can lead to energy spikes followed by crashes. Often kids will not drink water because it “doesn’t taste good”. If you need to encourage your swimmer to hydrate, a 50/50 mix of water and sports drink may help and will decrease the risk of spike and crash that could come from drinking straight juice or sports drink.

[See the next page for Meet Day food recommendations]

**Meet Day Food Recommendations for Swimmers**

**Eat Breakfast**

While many people skip breakfast on a regular basis, it is not a good idea for both swimmers *and* parents who have to sit at long hot meets. The potential risks include a slowed metabolism throughout the day, a tendency to become ravenous and binge on unhealthy foods later, weight gain, headaches, fatigue, and reduced concentration. If you want your swimmer to perform at his/her best, you need to make sure they eat a good breakfast with a balance of carbs, protein and healthy fat. Breakfast (or lunch for later meets) should be eaten approximately one hour before start time.

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| **Poor Breakfast Choices** | **Good Breakfast Choices** |
| Doughnuts  Pastries  Croissants  Pancakes with syrup  White Bagels/toast  Sugary cereals | Whole grain bagel/toast with peanut butter or low fat cream cheese  Eggs  Fruit  Greek Yogurt (higher in protein than regular yogurt)  Oatmeal or other hot-cooked grain cereal  Breakfast/Protein Bars (watch sugar content)  Whole grain pancakes with fruit  Whole grain cereal and milk |

**Snacks**

With meets lasting several hours, your swimmer will need snacks throughout the day. Snacks should include a combination of carbohydrates, protein, and healthy fats. Good options include granola bars, breakfast bars, protein bars, dry whole grain cereal, fruit (bananas, grapes and oranges are good options), and peanut butter sandwiches.

**Timing Snacks**

It is important that you portion out snacks and instruct your child to eat one at a time. While it is sometimes difficult to know when the children will be swimming their events, they should try not to eat anything within 30 minutes of an event. You don’t want their bodies sending blood to their stomachs to help in digestion when the body needs it going to their muscles during their event.

If you would like more information, please don’t hesitate to ask.

*Source: Idea Health & Fitness Association,* [*www.ideafit.com*](http://www.ideafit.com)