



Pārtikas piedevas meitenēm – skrējējām.

Nutrition for female athletes.

Jeanette Crosland examines the nutritional needs of female athletes and highlights some areas that need special attention.

In many respects female athletes are no different from male athletes when it comes to nutrition. The basic principles of carbohydrate, protein and fat are the same and the need for vitamins and minerals is still important. Basically the right balance for performance and health.

However there are certain aspects of nutrition that are perhaps a little more important for female athletes and some attention to these areas will help to ensure that health is maintained – which in turn will assist them in maximizing performance.

ENERGY

Energy requirements are related to sport, discipline, amount of training. As females are usually lighter than males, energy requirements are generally a little lower than those for male. Carbohydrate remains important but can sometimes be bulky. Smaller females may have a problem eating the volumes of food needed – but insufficient energy and carbohydrate will prevent athletes training at the level they need to perform well.

Smaller more frequent meals may help and snacks between meals can also help maintain food intake.

Squash/sports drinks/fruit juice during the day will increase carbohydrate and energy although it is important to remember that sugary foods alone are not the answer. The starchy carbohydrates are important for the nutrients that they provide so sugary foods should be seen as an extra. Good tooth care is also important.

QUANTITY

Occasionally females – especially teenagers – may be conscious of eating what they perceive as a lot of food. They compare themselves to their (inactive) friends. This group of athletes may need encouraging and reminding how important food is for sport and how different the requirements of inactive and active people are.

Some female athletes may be conscious of needing to lose a little weight. Unfortunately some see drastic reduction in food to be the answer. Weight is lost but so is muscle, power, strength, stamina etc. Females who really need to lose weight

should seek professional advice from an sports dietitian or sports nutritionist. Those who really do not need to lose weight should be encouraged to eat for their training.

PROTEIN

Although very high intakes of protein are not needed, it is important that enough is eaten to meet the needs of training. Those at risk of low protein intakes are:

1. Vegetarians;
2. Those who restrict energy intakes to lose excess weight or make weight for competition;
3. Those who eat little meat;
4. Occasionally endurance athletes who place a lot of importance on carbohydrate – because they need it for training – find that protein gets a little left out.

It is important to include a source of protein at every meal – milk or soya milk, meat, chicken, fish, beans, lentils, tofu, soya, eggs and cheese etc.

CALCIUM

Female are more prone to bone problems such as osteoporosis because of hormonal involvement and calcium has a role to play in prevention as well as treatment. Having just looked at those who may be at risk from lower protein intakes there is an important point to be made that very high protein diet – which have become something of a fashion at the moment, increase the risk of osteoporosis, as does excess alcohol. Not a dietary issue but smoking is another factor which increase the chance of developing osteoporosis as well.

Maintain a regular adequate intake of dietary calcium throughout life.

IRON

Low iron levels in the circulating blood (anemia) are more common in:

1. Females;
2. Athletes;
3. Teenagers;
4. Vegetarians.

A fair percentage of the first three can be found in athletic populations. Iron losses through menstruation tend to be higher in younger females, increasing their risk above that of those who are slightly older.

Iron is important because it forms hemoglobin in the blood, which carries oxygen around the body and takes it to the muscles that are needed for sport. This ability to carry oxygen is obviously very important to athletes.

Female athletes should ensure a regular intake of iron – containing foods. Including red meat in the diet a couple of times a week is a good idea, especially as the iron in meat is much easier for the body to absorb than iron found in non-meat items.

Foods with a reasonable iron content, which if eaten regularly will increase iron intake include: breakfast cereals that are often fortified with iron, oily fish, green

leafy vegetables, lentils, dried fruit such as raisins and apricots, beans such as red kidney beans and chickpeas.

To help the body to use the iron, include a food which is high in vitamin C in the same meal. For example tomatoes, red and green peppers, kiwi fruits, citrus fruits, a glass of pure orange or other citrus fruit juice, blackcurrants and their juice and broccoli.

A major symptom of anemia is fatigue and anyone who suspects that they are anemic should see their doctor for blood tests and treatment.

FLUID

Good hydration is important to female athletes as well as males. Men are not the only ones who sweat!

Sweat rates can be higher in larger individuals but there is an inborn element to how much we sweat and little people can sweat heavily too.

Know your own sweat rate by getting weighed before and after exercise – rubbed dry and with a minimum of clothes. This will show you how much fluid you have lost in sweat. Any loss needs replacing and in fact sweat loss should be multiplied by one and a half times to give fluid requirement.

FOLIC ACID

Not exactly a sports issue but very much a female one. For those who are planning on having children (and not all children are planned!) research has shown that ensuring an adequate intake of folic acid can help to prevent some serious birth defects.

Therefore it is recommended that women of childbearing age need to consider more folic acid in their diet. Major sources include fortified foods such as some breads and many breakfast cereals. Some fruits, vegetables and yeast extracts contain folic acid in the form of foliates and therefore females are encouraged to eat more dark green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, sprouts and spinach, cauliflower, baked beans, peas, oranges, potatoes. Marmite and Bovril. Some women take folic acid in the form of tablet or capsule consult your doctor or pharmacist about it.

PREGNANCY

While not too many athletes will maintain training throughout a pregnancy, there will be a number who will undertake some training – and of course this must only be at suitable levels and with the approval of the doctor if there is any medical risk.

During pregnancy a healthy diet is obviously important but there are certain foods which should be avoided such as following:

1. Soft mould-ripened cheese, such as Camembert, Brie and blue-veined cheese.
2. Uncooked or undercooked ready-prepared meals.
3. Only eat meat that has been well cooked.

4. Make sure you don't have too much vitamin A – avoid taking high-dose multivitamin supplements and avoid eating liver and liver products such as pate.
5. Limit the amount of tuna you eat. You shouldn't eat more than one tuna steak or two medium-size cans of tuna a week.

The list does vary from time to time. It isn't that long time ago that females were considered rather fragile for many sports. Women can train and compete to the highest level but keep an eye on food and fluids and you will be able to get more out of your training.

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