

A Coach's Role in Nutrition for Young Athletes

A well-balanced and nutritious diet is important for young athletes. It supports growing bodies, keeps them healthy, and gives them the fuel to perform their best. For young athletes, it is especially important to get the right amount, and the right kinds, of foods. Healthy foods will allow players to perform better. Just being in sports is not enough to keep kids healthy.

Playing sports sometimes makes eating healthy challenging for youth and their families. Players in a rush may grab a fast food burger on the way to or from practice. There may be only “treats” available after a game and food from a concession stand is often filled with candy, chips and hotdogs. The flood of advice and advertising about food can also be confusing. Coaches can play an important role in promoting healthy eating. This handout offers some basic guidelines drawn from the best available science, with an understanding of what really happens with kids in sports.

The many roles of a COACH

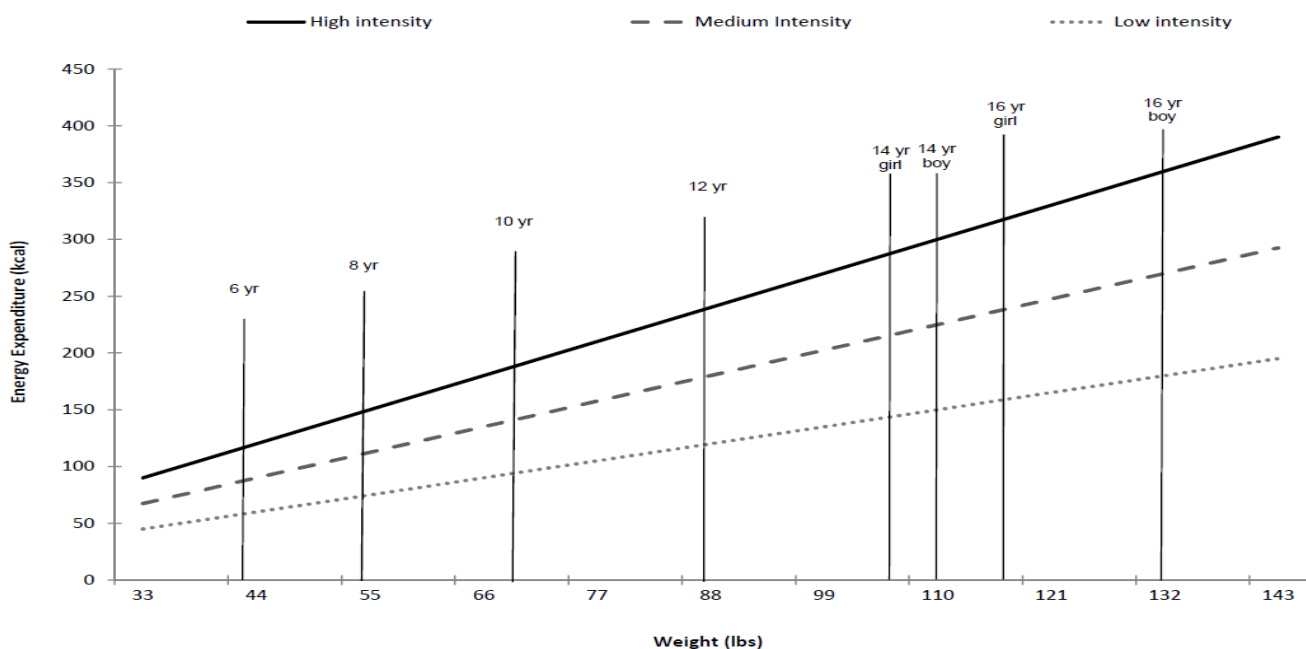
A coach is not only an individual who teaches skills of a specific sport. A coach is a teacher, a role model, a trainer, a disciplinarian, a mentor, and a motivator. Coaches are supportive and want to teach athletes to do their best. Kids look up to you as a coach and want guidance on what to eat to perform their best. A healthy nutrition message from you can get your athletes on the right track. It is important that you place a value on healthy eating!

How much do kids in sports need to eat?

Youth who play sports are more physically active than youth who do not, but surprisingly they are just as likely to be overweight. Kids have to balance how much they eat with how much activity they get. In fact, kids who play sports eat more fast food and drink more sugar-sweetened beverages (e.g., soda pop and sports drinks).

Kids do not expend as much energy while they are playing sports as you might think. Younger kids do not burn as many calories during sport as older kids. Older kids should be monitored more closely to assure they are getting enough healthy nutrition to support their activity level, especially endurance athletes.

The graph shows how many additional calories kids burn during a typical **1 hour long sports practice** at high,



medium, and low intensity exercise. The main reason is that most kids are only active for about half of a typical practice. The amount of calories depends on the intensity of the activity. For example, a low intensity activity such as walking or golfing, burns fewer calories than a medium intensity activity such as riding a bicycle or playing baseball, and a high intensity activity such as running, swimming, dancing, basketball, soccer, or football. Also, the more a kid weighs, the more calories burned.

What players *should* eat

3 balanced meals a day, plus healthy snacks – with practice and game schedules, it is important to consume adequate nutrition throughout the day. For practices that occur over dinner, athletes should eat an afternoon snack.

Whole grains – whole grain breads, pastas and crackers, brown rice, oatmeal

Lean proteins – poultry, pork, fish and beans; limit red meat – eat no more than twice a week

Healthy fats – olive and canola oils, baked fish, tuna, guacamole, nuts and seeds

Fruits and non-fried vegetables – choose a variety and go for bright and deep colors!

H₂O – to stay hydrated athletes should drink water and limit sports drinks unless exercising hard for more than one hour; no energy drinks

Limit – fast food; salty snacks; candy and other sugary snacks; soda, sports drinks, and energy drinks

Encourage healthy eating behaviors

1. Get smart about healthy foods, snacks, and beverages for youth athletes.
2. Be a good role model. Young athletes look up to you for guidance, structure and support. If they see you drinking a soda, sports drink or energy drink, they are going to think it is 'ok' for them to drink those items too.
3. Encourage healthy team snacks. Provide snack lists for parents and discourage "unhealthy" snacks or foods that will not fuel the body. Foods brought by parents for the athletes should be thought of as healthy, energy building snacks and not treats.
4. Avoid using unhealthy foods as a reward for performance, behavior or executing a skill properly. Food should be perceived as a healthy item necessary for optimal performance, not a reward. Instead use stickers, a fun game/drill the kids like, or give verbal or non-verbal (i.e., thumbs up, high five) praise to reinforce hard work, sportsmanship, and good performance.
5. Good nutrition is part of a good training program. Well-balanced and nutritious foods and beverages should be consumed before, during, and after events.
6. The positive effects of a coach on players extend beyond the practice floor and games. Encourage healthy lifestyles which include physical activity and eating healthy foods outside of practice and games. Lessons and behaviors learned through youth sport carry into adolescence and adulthood.
7. Recognize the players might better receive the healthy nutrition messages if they come from you – so keep it positive and enthusiastic!
8. Encourage healthy eating but avoid stressing the importance of appearance or "making weight" – good intentions can be harmful to some. Food is for fuel.
9. Unless the athletes are active for longer than 1 hour they should be drinking water only. Sports drinks and energy drinks contain lots of extra sugar, sodium and caffeine most kids do not need. Make sure each player has his or her own water bottle. Allow for water breaks frequently.

Young athletes need a healthy balanced diet. Feed your athlete's body what it needs!