

Football Food

Nutritional advice for soccer players, parents and coaches

Sport nutrition, diet or food and drink, for football players is becoming increasingly scientific and recognised for its importance in the game of football. Almost every professional club will have a nutritionist or similar expert advisor for their team. This article covers the most important principles of sport nutrition for amateur players and coaches.

Why is sport nutrition or diet important in sports?

Food provides us with energy for our muscles, brain and other organs. Sport requires plenty of exercise, and therefore it is important to have energy available to us during the game. The energy available to us at any particular time depends on our blood sugar levels.

If we over-eat, we become over-weight. The heavier we are, the more work our muscles have to do to take us the same distance. This reduces our stamina, and our ability to accelerate quickly. If we under-eat, we can become weak and our overall health can decline, because we are not getting enough nutrients.

A healthy diet improves our general level of health, and can help us recover more quickly from injuries.

Along with a program of fitness training, our diet can help us develop stamina and improve athletic performance.

Diet is essential for our growth, and development.

What to eat and when to eat it

The timing of the meals you consume is important. On the day of a match the intake of fat and protein should be restricted, as these nutrients require a relatively long time to be digested. Plan to have your pre-competition meal 3-4 hours before the match. Your pre-competition meal should be: high in carbohydrate (this is the fuel that your body needs to perform at the highest level), low in fat, low in protein, low in fibre, not too bulky, and easy to digest. You should consume foods such as: breakfast cereal with low fat milk, toast or bread with jam/honey, sandwiches with banana/honey/jam, pasta/rice with low fat sauce, muffins, baked potato, fruit, energy bars, and orange juice.

A snack high in carbohydrate may be eaten about 2 hours before the match, however the time reference is only a guideline as there are great individual differences in the ability to digest food. It is a good idea for you to experiment with a variation of foods at different times before training sessions. Foods such as toast, bread or crumpets with jam/honey, sweetened cereal and low fat milk, muffins, orange juice and jelly sweets could be consumed.

Once the game is over, fluids should be replaced and carbohydrate should be consumed as soon as possible to promote recovery of glycogen stores. **During the cool down you should consume fluids and small snacks, such as jelly sweets, jaffa cakes and jammy dodgers.** As soon as possible you should aim to consume a meal which is high in carbohydrates. Foods such as pasta, spaghetti, rice, noodles, low fat pasta sauce, bread, potatoes, and baked beans should be consumed during this period.

Carbohydrate rich foods must be the main source of your diet. Table 1 lists foods, which contain a lot of carbohydrate. You should aim to consume the main bulk of your diet from complex carbohydrates. Simple carbohydrates should not be consumed in large quantities and are more useful as snacks between workouts, or to top up your energy intake. The carbohydrate you consume should be balanced with a healthy intake of protein, low fat and plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Table 1 Carbohydrate-Rich Foods

Complex Carbohydrates

Simple Carbohydrates

Mixture of Complex and Simple Carbohydrates

Bread

Sugar

Cakes

Pasta

Jam

Biscuits

Rice

Honey

Puddings

Noodles

Yoghurt

Sweet Pastries

Oats

Fromage Frais

Cheesecake

Breakfast Cereals (unsweetened)

Ice Cream

Breakfast Cereals (sweetened)

Pulses (beans, lentils, peas)

Jelly

Bananas

Baked Beans

Raisins

Grapes

Apricots, Peaches

Full sugar cordials

Oranges

Potatoes

Jelly sweets

Parsnips, sweetcorn

Soft drinks (Lucozade, sprite, energy drinks)

If you do not consume enough carbs (kcal/energy), then you will not have enough energy to complete the match (or training) and subsequently your performance will suffer, and more

importantly you will be more susceptible to injury.

Fluids

We've done good food and we've looked at what snacks can boost the body during and after a match or training session. Now let's look at what you should drink.

The water lost from the body during sweating needs to be replaced to stop you getting tired quickly, and also speed up the recovery process – that means feeling fitter and sharper afterwards a lot sooner.

These checks will help players:

- * Weight – 1kg of weight lost during a training session is equal to 1 litre of fluid lost.
- * The 'pee test' – If your urine is dark coloured, it means you need to have a drink. Lots of trips to the toilet, producing lots of clear coloured urine, shows you've taken on enough fluid.
- * Thirst – Being thirsty is an unreliable indicator of when you need to have a drink. If you're thirsty, you're actually already partly dehydrated so if you finish a training session and you're gasping it's a giveaway you haven't taken enough fluid on board.

What's best to drink?

For footballers, the best fluid to drink is a diluted carbohydrate/electrolyte solution. In plain English, that's the kind of stuff you'll find in stuff like Isostar, Lucozade Sport and Gatorade.

When should I drink?

Ideally, it's best to drink before, during and after a training session, as well as drinking frequently during a match.

How much should I drink?

Only a little – but often. If you drink too much too quickly, you run the risk of getting a stomach upset.