

Fueling Your Young Athlete

Article written by Tara Dunker (tara.dunker@unl.edu), MS, RD, Extension Educator

While a young athlete's innate passion for physical activity is a definite advantage for their long-term health, parents and caregivers should remain aware of how their children are nourishing their bodies. According to *Nutrition for Kids*, a website focused on health and nutrition education for children, here are some key points to consider:

Good Hydration

The nutrient of most immediate concern is water. Drink it before, during and after participating in physical activity for best hydration, rather than waiting until thirsty. Sports drinks are only helpful when excessive amounts of sweat are lost by being out in the heat or participating in vigorous activity for longer than 90 minutes. Stick with water to keep those sneaky added sugars at bay.

Snack Smart

Make time for snacks that will keep your child energized. Yogurt with a banana, baby carrots with hummus dip, or peanut butter with crackers and apple slices are all examples of smart snacks that require minimal time and effort to prepare. Check out this No-Bake Energy Bites recipe for a smart snack the whole family can have fun making together.

No-Bake Energy Bites

¾ cup quick oats	1 teaspoon vanilla extract
¼ cup wheat bran	1 tablespoon slivered almonds
⅓ cup honey	2 tablespoons chocolate chips (optional)
¼ cup almond or peanut butter	2 tablespoons dried mixed berries

1. Wash your hands and the food preparation surface.
2. Mix together oats and wheat bran in a bowl.
3. Combine honey, nut butter, and vanilla extract in a separate bowl.
4. Stir until well-mixed.
5. Combine wet mixture and dry mixture.
6. Stir in almonds, chocolate chips, and dried mixed berries.
7. Put on a pair of disposable food safe gloves.
8. Spray cooking spray on one hand. Rub hands together.
9. Roll mixture into 15 balls and serve. If not serving immediately, cover and refrigerate.



Nutrition Facts: 1 ball, Calories 75, Total Fat 3 grams, Saturated Fat 1 gram, Carbohydrate 10 grams, Dietary Fiber 1 gram, Total Sugar 6 grams, Added Sugar 5 grams, Protein 2 grams.



However, if you do not have time to prepare energy bites, or you are needing an option that does not require refrigeration, look for quick, easy, non-perishable bars at the grocery store. They can be a great solution for an on-the-go family. Be sure to check the label for whole ingredients such as oats, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and fruit for best nutrition. And prioritize protein content, while limiting added sugar. Compare labels to make the best selection.

Fuel and Replenish

An eating pattern high in saturated fat and added sugar will only serve to hinder your young athlete, especially right before participating in physical activity. Avoid things like fried foods and candy bars before practices or games. Be sure your child replenishes their body after being physically active, with plenty of fluids (preferably water) and a nutrient-rich meal or snack with a healthy combination of fats, lean protein and whole grain—think bean burrito or a slice of pizza loaded with vegetables. For breakfast, think fruit and yogurt smoothies or an omelet with cheese and vegetables.

Balanced Nutrition

The more active your child is, the more carbohydrates they'll need to fuel their muscles. Fatigue, weight loss and lack of endurance are signs the body's carbohydrate stores need replenishing. Nutrient-rich foods like starchy vegetables, whole grains, beans, and legumes will do the trick to get them back on track. The best way to ensure your child is getting all the nutrients their body needs to grow and develop is by encouraging them to eat foods from each of the five food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy. [MyPlate.gov](https://www.myplate.gov) has a wealth of information on incorporating a variety of healthy choices from each food group. Following these recommendations is good for everyone—athlete or not—so your whole family will reap the benefits all season long.

Sources:

1. Text citation: Nutrition for Kids. (2018). Feeding the Young Athlete. Retrieved from: <https://nutritionforkids.com/2018/03/09/feeding-the-young-athlete>
2. Recipe citation: WeCook: Fun with Food and Fitness. (2018). No-Bake Energy Bites.