



SPEED PROJECT

Sport & Prevention of Emerging Eating Disorders

THEMATIC AREA 3

What an athlete needs: nutrition, energy and performance

For those who play sport, nutrition is a fundamental resource, not simply a way to control weight. These cards outline, in essential terms, the link between nutrition, energy and performance and the importance of eating regularly and in a balanced way.

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AREA 3 • NUTRITION, ENERGY AND PERFORMANCE — CARD 1

Nutrition principles for an athlete

For an athlete, nutrition does not serve only to relieve hunger, but to provide the body with the energy and nutrients it needs, in the right way. Following a regular, balanced diet helps you feel stronger and more resistant during training. Carbohydrates are important for energy, proteins contribute to muscle development and recovery, while healthy fats support the proper functioning of the body. Drinking enough water during the day is also essential for health and for sporting performance.

An athlete should avoid going without food for many hours and should be careful not to skip meals. When you go too long without eating, you may experience a drop in energy, difficulty concentrating, tiredness and a worsening of performance. For this reason it is important to include, in addition to the main meals, some snacks: fruit, yoghurt, milk, nuts, bread or small sandwiches can help maintain a good energy balance throughout the day.

It is not advisable to start training either on a completely empty stomach or immediately after a large meal. Training on an empty stomach can make you feel drained, more tired and less able to perform; training when too full can cause heaviness, bloating and digestive difficulties. It is therefore important to arrange a balanced meal before training that provides energy but also allows you to feel light and at ease during physical activity.

A regular diet is important not only for performance, but also for growth, recovery and general health. Especially in adolescents who play sport, an adequate, balanced diet helps support both physical performance and mental well-being.



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AREA 3 • NUTRITION, ENERGY AND PERFORMANCE — CARD 2

Balancing nutrition and energy

For those who play sport, it is important to maintain a balance between the energy consumed and the energy taken in through food. The body uses energy throughout the day — not only during training, but also while walking, climbing stairs, studying, thinking or even resting. The longer and more intense the training, the greater the energy requirement. For this reason, diet does not necessarily have to be identical every day.

Eating too little can cause tiredness, weakness, difficulty concentrating, slower recovery and a drop in performance. Especially in adolescents, insufficient energy intake can negatively affect both growth and development and sporting performance. Conversely, eating too much can make you feel heavy and less active. The goal is not to eat as little as possible, nor to constantly eat too much, but to give the body the energy it needs at the right time and in the right amount.

Energy requirements change according to the type of sport, the duration of training, age, sex, growth stage and a person's physical structure. The needs of those who practise endurance sports (long-distance running, swimming, cycling) may differ from those who practise strength or team sports (football, volleyball, basketball). Height, muscle mass, level of daily activity and metabolism also vary from person to person: for this reason there is no single dietary plan suitable for everyone.

It is important to learn to listen to the signals of one's own body and to adapt nutrition to one's needs. Feeling frequently tired, having little energy during training, recovering slowly or feeling excessively hungry may be signs of insufficient energy intake. The goal is not only weight control, but maintaining a good level of energy, supporting growth and helping the athlete feel well both physically and mentally.



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AREA 3 • NUTRITION, ENERGY AND PERFORMANCE — CARD 3

How to eat to improve performance

Nutrition directly affects sporting performance. Before training it is important to eat a balanced meal with a greater proportion of carbohydrates, such as bread, pasta, rice, oats or fruit. This does not mean eating only carbohydrates, but creating a balanced meal that provides energy without making digestion too heavy. Before training it is preferable to avoid foods that are too fatty, very high in fibre or that may cause bloating and intestinal discomfort, such as fried foods, large amounts of legumes, fizzy drinks or very large meals.

After training, it is important to eat not only proteins but a complete, balanced meal. Foods such as eggs, yoghurt, milk, fish, meat or legumes support muscle recovery, while carbohydrates allow you to replenish the energy reserves used. Eating only proteins is not enough: to support recovery and restore energy, a balanced and complete meal is needed.

During training, through sweat, you lose not only fluids but also important minerals such as sodium, potassium and magnesium. For this reason, after physical activity, in addition to water it can be useful to eat foods rich in minerals such as banana, yoghurt, milk or nuts, which help replenish what has been lost through sweating.

When the diet is regular, varied and balanced — especially in adolescents who play sport — in most cases there is no need to resort to supplements. Rather than relying on external products, attention should be focused on building a complete, sufficient and balanced diet every day.



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