

An illustration of a white plate of food. The plate is divided into sections. On the left, there are brown, oval-shaped grains. In the center, there is a pile of brown, irregular shapes representing lean protein, garnished with a green leaf. On the right, there is a pile of green, elongated vegetables. A small bowl of red sauce is visible on the far right. A hand is holding a wooden stick, possibly a chopstick, near the red sauce. Three white circular labels with black text are placed over the food: 'Grains' over the brown ovals, 'Vegetables' over the green sticks, and 'Lean Protein' over the brown irregular shapes.

Grains

Vegetables

**Lean
Protein**

Food for Thought

→ *By Clara Boudette*

Check Out These Healthy Tips So That You Can Enjoy Your Favorite Foods This Holiday Season And Still Have Peak Performance On The Ice

The holiday season brings with it endless amounts of delicious foods, sweet and savory snacks, and plenty of opportunities to build your nutrition skill set.

Like training and conditioning, nutrition is another tool athletes can use to maximize their on-ice performance.

Proper nourishment is important for everyone, but athletes especially benefit from paying close attention to the types of foods they eat, timing of meals, and recovery efforts to gain an edge over their competition.

“We think of using food as a tool to support performance,” said Carrie Aprik, dietitian for the U.S. Women’s National Team and Winter Sports at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee. “It’s tying together all those pieces and if they’re healthier people they’re better performers.”

Aprik works with some of the top athletes in the world, but even young players looking to get the most out of their game can benefit from incorporating a variety of nutrition strategies into their everyday routines and game plans.

If you don’t know where to start, Aprik has got you covered with six nutrition tips for hockey players.

1 Have an inclusionary, positive mindset

A positive mindset towards nutrition helps establish habits that lead to lasting impacts.

“If you’re trying to make your nutrition better, start with what you should be adding to your diet to enhance your body, health, and performance, rather than what you should take out of your diet,” said Aprik. “That inclusionary approach is so crucial for long term health and wellness and developing a healthy relationship with eating and your body.”

It’s important to remember that nutrition is not the same as dieting. Aprik warns against restrictive approaches that cut out entire food groups or limit eating as these practices can create a negative relationship with food and prevent athletes from getting the nutrients they need.

The holiday season is meant for spending time with friends and family and Aprik would hate for athletes to miss out on their favorite celebratory treats.

Parents and coaches can help establish an inclusionary mindset towards nutrition by encouraging athletes to try new foods and incorporate a variety across their diet, as well as establish a positive food culture in the home and locker room. A great way to start is by including young athletes in the process, and the holiday season provides a fun and festive environment to start. Helping in the kitchen, having a hand in grocery shopping, and packing lunches are steps kids and parents can take to develop their own strengths in nutrition.

2 Define your goals

When working with members of the U.S. Women’s National Team, Aprik always begins by asking their goals to determine their nutritional needs.

Identifying performance or body-related goals is the first step to creating an individualized nutrition strategy. Goals can be simple, like



wanting to feel more energized during games, or more targeted, such as gaining muscle mass. Having a goal in place provides the foundation for an athlete’s nutrition strategy and can help outline the specifics of what their diet should look like.



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3 Fueling

One of the most basic pillars of nutrition is energy balance. This ensures that energy intake matches energy expenditure. Because athletes burn a lot of calories, it’s important that they provide their bodies with the energy needed to perform. This is called fueling.

“For fueling the muscles and brain for hockey, we’re always pushing a high carbohydrate diet and trying to get our athletes to understand how much they actually need and why it’s important,” said Aprik.

According to the U.S. Olympic-Paralympic Sport Nutrition Team, carbohydrates make great pre-game fuel because they are broken down into glucose for the brain, muscles, and liver. They also prolong endurance and help delay physical and mental fatigue.

Protein is another important component of fueling as it helps build and repair muscle tissues and facilitates chemical reactions in the body.

When developing a fueling plan, consider the duration, intensity and type of competition.

Chicken and rice is a popular pre-game meal among NHLers and hockey players of all levels because it has everything an athlete needs to fuel their body for competition.

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“It’s one of those things that’s boring, but it’s a staple for a reason,” Aprik said. “Chicken and rice is a carbohydrate-rich meal that is easily digestible, palatable, available, and low cost.”

If chicken and rice isn’t your thing, quinoa, whole grain breads, wraps, and pasta make great alternatives. Other types of poultry, beef, seafood, eggs, and plant-based proteins are all great sources of protein.



Pre-game meals should be eaten four hours before game time followed by carb-rich snacks and fluids one to two hours prior to puck drop.

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Timing

Fueling goes hand-in-hand with timing. Not only is it important what you eat, but when you eat it. Pre-game meals should be eaten four hours before game time followed by carb-rich snacks and fluids one to two hours prior to puck drop. This gives the body enough time to digest the food and replenish its energy sources. Eating too close to game time can cause discomfort and leave the body short on fuel.

Aprik recommends athletes don’t have gaps larger than three-to-four hours in their day without eating. Mapping out your school and practice schedule and planning when to eat meals and snacks is a great exercise to ensure you’re getting the fuel you need come game time.



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Hydration

While not often thought of as part of nutrition, hydration is a key component in helping the body get the nutrients it needs and support optimized performance.

Water surrounds your muscles, joints, and soft tissues. It is the delivery system for nutrients and is responsible for getting rid of waste products and helps regulate body temperature. Proper hydration can help the body recover quicker and minimize muscle cramps.

“Having adequate fluid for all of those roles in the body is critical,” said Aprik.

THE FOUR R’S OF RECOVERY

REPLENISH energy stores with carbohydrates

REPAIR muscles with high-quality protein

REINFORCE muscle cells and central nervous system function with antioxidant rich food like fruits and veggies

REHYDRATE with plenty of fluids

Carrying a water bottle at school, drinking at least two cups of water at meals, and snacking on fruits and veggies with high water content are a few great ways to increase fluid intake.

For intense training (exceeding 60-90 minutes), sports drinks help replenish fluids and electrolytes.

6

Recovery

Recovery is another essential function of nutrition that helps the body optimize training and ensure athletes are prepared for the next competition.

The recovery process involves four steps, easily remembered as “The Four R’s of Recovery.” Replenish energy stores with carbohydrates, repair muscles with high-quality protein, reinforce muscle cells and central nervous system function with antioxidant rich food like fruits and veggies, and rehydrate with plenty of fluids.

Aprik recommends consuming nutrients and fluids 30-60 minutes after a workout. Proper recovery is especially important in high-intensity training or consecutive days of competition, such as a weekend tournament.

One of the best recovery drinks for hockey players might already be in your fridge.

“Chocolate milk has all of our needs for recovery in one,” said Aprik. “It’s a liquid, so it helps with rehydration, and it has a great ratio of carbohydrate to protein. It has electrolytes that help with that rehydration process, so it’s really an all-in-one product. Plus it’s low-cost, so it’s available for a lot of people where as some of those more niche products might not be.”

Be Wary Of Trends, Trust The Facts

When strategizing your nutrition, it’s important to do so based off quality fact-based information and remember that nutrition looks different for everyone.

“Diet culture is a hugely pervasive problem in every human’s experience, including athletes,” said Aprik. “Anything that promotes restriction to the extreme of removing whole food groups or foods and says that’s the answer to all your performance needs is a red flag.”

Many diets on the internet are developed for weight loss in adults and are not appropriate for youth athletes.

Beware of products or diets with financial motives behind them and consider the credentials and education of the people endorsing them.

“Good nutrition is not flashy or exciting,” said Aprik. “If it’s boring and consistent and you have variety, you’re doing the correct things.” ☆