

Nutrition: Eat Healthy, Play Healthy!

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We all know what a demanding sport soccer is when it comes to our schedules; last month we discussed building in active rest periods in between all the trainings, games, tournaments and camps that fill up our days and weekends month after month. But have you stopped to think about how demanding soccer really is on your body and mind?

From a physical aspect, soccer requires high-intensity efforts of strength, endurance, speed and agility. On the mental side of things, soccer requires concentration and agility to rapidly process information to make quick decisions. Soccer players can fuel these high-energy needs with a good diet and the right nutrition. Per the US Soccer Federation's "Recognize to Recover" program, soccer players can fuel these high-energy needs by properly fueling both their mind and body "Especially during periods with many matches or a lot of training, nutrition is important to recover and protect against overuse injuries. A good diet and the right nutrition can support intensive training while limiting the risks of illness or injury...Making sure that the brain is functioning well is an important factor when optimizing performance..." So how does one do this?

Because every player's body is built differently, there is no magic equation when it comes to nutrition for soccer players at the various levels of play. The best place to start is by learning (and putting into practice) the basics of healthy eating and then exploring your own individual needs from there. If you have a "food first mentality", you should be able to properly fuel your body with all the necessary energy for activities like soccer from the six basic categories of nutrients: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals and water.

No matter your age, level of play or where you are in your season, the following nutrition guidelines are a safe bet for soccer players per the NCAA:

1. *Eat minimally processed foods.* Limit sugary drinks, cookies/cakes/candies, white bread, white pasta and white rice as well as processed deli meats, fast food, butter, fried foods and whole-fat dairy foods.
2. *Eat a rainbow.* Choose a variety of colors and types when it comes to whole fruits and vegetables.
3. *Make good protein choices and include with every meal.* Choose from lean cuts of fresh meat, fresh fish, protein-rich animal products such as milk, cheese, eggs and yogurt or protein-rich vegetable products such as tofu, soy, legumes and nuts.
4. *Choose healthy fats.* Include healthy fats such as olive oil, flaxseed, high in omega 3 fish choices, avocados, peanut butter, nuts such as almonds or cashews and seeds like sunflower, pumpkin or sesame.
5. *Choose Whole-Grain Carbohydrates.* If you follow the above recommendations, you will be naturally consuming "good" carbohydrates. To wisely add to that, choose whole grain foods such as brown rice, whole wheat pasta, oatmeal or whole grain cereals like Cheerios.
6. *Eat breakfast every day.* This is especially important on training or game days. You need to jump start your metabolism with a healthy mix of protein, carbohydrates and fluids.
7. *Don't skip meals.* Another very important practice for active individuals. You need to properly fuel your body for all the energy it will burn through while you are performing at your best.

Sources:

1. U.S. Soccer Federation "Recognize to Recover" – www.recognizetorecover.org
2. NCAA's Nutrition for the Soccer Student-Athlete – www.ncaa.org