

Food for Action

What's up? Why aren't we starting practice?" Amy said as she ran onto the field to join her teammates.

"The coach wants to talk to us about eating," Jillian answered.

"Eating?" Amy said. "I want to learn about fast pitch, not fast food." She dropped her glove and sat down in the middle of the pitcher's mound. Then she reached into her backpack and pulled out an apple.

"That looks good," Coach said as he walked up to the group. "And it will give you some energy."

"What do we need energy for?" Amy asked. "We aren't practicing. We're just talking."

"You need energy for everything," Coach answered. "To blink your eyes, to grow, even to sleep! Your body is like a car. It won't work if you don't put fuel in it."

"How much energy do you need?" Jillian asked.

Healthy Eating Hints

Be a better and stronger athlete by fueling your body properly. Be sure to eat regular meals each day-no skipping. Always have breakfast to start the day. Eat a variety of foods, and be sure to get plenty of nutrition from the foods you eat. That means eating lots of fruits and vegetables, along with other complex carbohydrates such as whole-grain foods and cereal products, and protein.

Are you trying to lose weight to be better at your sport? In a word, don't. Talk to your doctor first. You may not need to diet. He or she can look at a number of factors-not just your weight. Your age, level of activity, and body type should all be considered. If you do need to go on a diet, your doctor may refer you to a registered dietician for advice. The dietician will help you come up with a healthy eating plan.

"That depends on your age, your size, and on how active you are," Coach explained. "Kids need a lot of energy because they're growing. Kids who play sports need even more. You need energy to keep your muscles moving and your brain sharp."

Ready, Set, Eat!

The coach explained that foods contain nutrients. One group is called *carbohydrates*.

"Carbohydrates are your body's main source of energy," he said. "They come from foods that contain starches and sugars."

"Candy gives me energy," said Amy.

The coach laughed. "That's not quite what I had in mind. Healthier carbohydrates are the more complex ones. They come from foods such as fruits, vegetables, and pasta. If you do sports, about half of what you eat should be carbohydrates," he said.

"I love pasta," Beth said.

"Me too," said Amy between bites of apple. "But what about meat?" she asked.

"Meat has protein," Coach explained. "You need protein for growth and to build and repair muscles and cells. Protein also gives you energy if you don't get enough carbohydrates. Nuts, beans, tofu, fish, and chicken are all high in protein."

"How much should you eat?" asked Beth.

"You should try to have some protein at every meal. A serving size of chicken or fish is about the size of a deck of cards. Two tablespoons of peanut butter make a serving."

"What else do you need?" asked Amy.

"Well, kids use a lot of energy. When you're running or biking for a long time, some of that energy comes from fat that's stored on your body," Coach explained.

"E-w-w! That sounds gross," said Beth. "I liked the stuff about the carbohydrates better."

"Carbohydrates are just one kind of food your body needs. Try not to think of one food group as being 'better' or 'worse' than another. They are all important for good health. And the best thing you can do as a young athlete is to eat a variety of foods from the Food Guide Pyramid," Coach explained.

Drink It In

"What about water?" Amy asked, reaching for a bottle.

"Good question," said Coach. "Water makes up most of our body. It's about 55 to 60 percent for me as an adult. It's even more for you. Water keeps your body temperature normal. It also helps the body transport nutrients and remove waste.

"For kids who play sports, water is especially important. Kids don't sweat as much as adults, so they get hotter when they exercise. If your body temperature gets too high, you can get sick.

"That's why you have to drink a lot."

"What about sports drinks?" Amy asked.

"They're OK," said Coach. "They give you some energy because they have sugar in them, and you might like the way they taste and drink more. But you don't really need them. You're not playing an endurance sport, so you won't be working hard for more than two hours. Water is fine for you, and it's cheaper."

"But how do I know if I'm drinking enough?" asked Beth.

"If you get muscle cramps or get really tired during a game or practice, you should be drinking more," said Coach. "Don't wait until you're thirsty! Have some water about 10 minutes before you start your sport and then take a break about every 20 minutes to have some more. Don't forget to drink again when the game or practice is over. And that reminds me..." Coach said, checking his watch.

"We know. It's time to start practice," said Jillian.

"Yes," said Coach. "Oh, and Amy, after warmups, we'll work on some pitching skills. Now, let's go have some fun!"

On Game Day

It's the day of the big game. What should you eat to play your best? As a rule, eat what you normally eat, but be sure you give your body enough time to digest the food.

Here are some guidelines for eating on game day.

Up to one hour before the game: It's best not to eat anything. Your stomach should be a little empty at game time. Your body needs to focus on playing your sport—not on digesting your food. And you're less likely to feel sick if your stomach doesn't have a lot of food sloshing around in it.

One or two hours before: Fruit, fruit juice, or vegetable juice.

Two or three hours before: Fruit, fruit juice, or vegetable juice, as before. You can also add some complex carbohydrates. Try whole-grain breads, a bagel, etc. Avoid fats, which may upset your stomach during the game.

Three or more hours before: Any of the foods mentioned above are fine. You can add some protein too—lean meats, low-fat dairy foods, peanut butter, and so forth.

Don't forget to drink plenty of fluids. Figure about a cup for every half-hour or hour of play. Have some after the game too. Water is best, but you can drink fruit juice mixed

with water if you like that. Avoid sodas, though. The sugar in them may upset your stomach. And the caffeine that some contain may make your body lose water faster.

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