
Getting and Keeping an Athlete's Attention

Athletes are busy people. A middle school soccer player may be involved in several activities such as band, scouts, paper routes, household chores, as well as school work and the pressures of being an adolescent. A high school football player has multiple practice sessions, weight training sessions, school, social activities, and homework. In college, another layer of responsibility emerges—living in a dorm or apartment and having to find meals or learn to cook. The professional athlete has demands of travel, media requests, community service, and possibly a family. With such diverse demands, how do sports dietitians get and keep the attention of athletes when talking about food and nutrition?

Do Your Homework

Know the skills and energy requirements of the sport of the athlete you are counseling. Tailor your advice to the energy systems (aerobic vs anaerobic) used in the athlete's sport, and research the supplements that are commonly used in the sport. Peruse the popular magazines devoted to the sport to learn the sports lingo and discover what sort of nutrition advice is dispensed in the media. Find out how the specific demands of the athlete's position differ from other positions on the team. Show the athlete you understand the needs of her/his sport or position. For example, a midfielder in soccer covers the most distance of any player on a soccer team—between 9 and 11 km (5.5 and 6.5 miles) per game!

Listen Actively and Be Respectful of the Athlete's Time

Come prepared for every session and make the most of your time. Use a nutrition assessment form to learn about the athlete and help you develop a realistic plan. If you use a form developed by someone else, customize it for your own needs. Make sure to collect information on not only what the athletes eat, but when they eat, where they eat, with whom they eat, and why they eat the foods they do. Let the athletes tell you about their sport, how long they have played, and how long they practice. Inquire about all types of training they undertake for the sport (1). For example, swimmers do “land training” in addition to work in the pool, and most all athletes train with weights.

Be Sensitive to Cultural Issues Surrounding Food

Help the athlete incorporate their cultural food preferences or religious practices into their meal plan. For example:

- A professional basketball player who is Muslim and honors Ramadan will need help in selecting the most nutrient-dense foods to eat before sunrise and after sunset. Helping an

athlete honor his or her religion while staying strong for training and competition can be a good opportunity for a sports dietitian to demonstrate the value of nutrition counseling.

- Almost one third of professional baseball players are Latino. A sports dietitian can help the clubhouse manager select nutritious foods that these players are accustomed to eating.

Be Mindful of Special Health Concerns of Athletes

Stay abreast of medical nutrition therapy for diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. For example, a sports dietitian can help an athlete with type 1 diabetes who is training for a marathon to avoid hypoglycemia during long training runs.

A sports dietitian can help vegetarian athletes sort through the wide range of meatless protein sources on the market. Refer athletes struggling with disordered eating to the proper professionals for a full evaluation.

Offer Practical Advice to the Athlete

Sports dietitians know which foods provide carbohydrates, protein, and fat and the best food sources of vitamin C, but athletes may have limited or inaccurate knowledge. Athletes have the same misconceptions about foods that other consumers have, so they welcome practical advice about what to eat.

Break the meal plan down into foods—instead of telling the athlete they need 1.4 g protein per kilogram of body weight, give them food options to meet the goal. Design a meal plan that shows these food options.

Give Athletes Solutions to Everyday Dilemmas

Show athletes how to distribute calories throughout the day. Tell them what to eat before and after practice, help them select meals from their favorite restaurant, and give them a plan for fluid consumption during training and competition.

Stay in the Moment

Emphasize to athletes how food and fluid choices can help their performance. Athletes respond more favorably to advice that will provide immediate benefits than they do to discussions of long-term health. For example, a female high school runner will find it more meaningful to learn that eating foods rich in calcium, protein, and vitamin D will help prevent stress fractures than to hear about the risk of osteoporosis for older women.

Keep It Short and Fun

When conducting nutrition education sessions for athletes, mini-lectures (20 minutes) are preferable to longer sessions. Don't be a talking head—plan fun activities (oral quizzes, food or fluid tastings, recipe demonstrations) to keep athletes engaged.

Talk in Threes

Communications experts tell us that when people are under stress they only hear three things. Nutrition counseling for a busy athlete can be stressful, so provide three key tips or ask the athlete to change three old habits at the first session. For example, give the athlete your top three tips to boost energy levels or three keys to decreasing body fat.

Be Clear and Positive About Nutrition

Avoid the “weasel” words (words such as “might,” “may,” “perhaps,” and “maybe”). Tell athletes the foods and fluids they eat and drink *will* affect their performance, not that they “might” help. Take a cue from the way that coaches talk to athletes—speak definitively and positively about the benefits of a sound nutrition plan in performance. Help athletes see that nutrition gives them an edge on their opponents and that proper fueling will make them better, stronger, faster, and less likely to be injured.

Sports nutrition is a rewarding field. Being a part of the athlete’s support team brings personal and professional satisfaction to the sports dietitian. When an athlete practices what you have coached her or him to do, a special bond is formed between you and the athlete. Being a spectator at sporting events takes on a whole new meaning when you know you have helped athletes or a team perform at their best.

Reference

1. Clark N. Communicating with athletes about nutrition. In: Rosenbloom C, ed. *Sports Nutrition: A Guide for the Professional Working with Active People*. 3rd ed. Chicago, Ill: American Dietetic Association; 2000:245-252.