

Nutrition, Exercise and Sleep for Young Athletes

Most people understand that nutrition and exercise are important parts of health. Growing research is showing that sleep deserves a spot along with them when we think of healthy lifestyle choices. The importance of these three pillars of health is difficult to overstate. The WHO estimated that by 2020, 2/3rds of all disease will be caused by lifestyle choices. While nutrition, exercise and sleep are important for all of us, let's look at how they relate to young athletes, especially as we consider their new lifestyle of sleeping late, home schooling and a decreased opportunity for spring athletics.

Nutrition

Keto, paleo, low-carb, intermittent fasting - the list of popular diets is endless. Food is fuel for young athletes to play and grow, so it's obviously important, but how do you know what to feed them? In the book "In Defense of Food" Michael Pollen wrote that we should "**Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.**" This is a good guideline, but it's important to understand what it really means. By "eat food" he means real food - things that you recognize where they came from. When you see an ear of corn you know it came from a field. When you see a chicken breast, you know it came from a chicken. These are real food. It's a lot harder to explain where a Twinkie came from.

The "not too much" part gets a little trickier because nutrition needs change with age, gender, and activity level. Lucky for us, the NIH has a handy chart [here](#) showing how many calories your youngster needs.

"Mostly plants" is also straightforward. This doesn't mean that everyone should be a vegetarian. It does mean that you should strive to feed your young athlete a healthy variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and seeds. Plants tend to contain a lot of healthy stuff like fiber, vitamins and minerals that are important for growth and development.

Exercise

Young athletes should have no problem meeting the guidelines issued by the US Department of Health and Human Services. They recommend that **children and adolescents ages 6 through 17 years do 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily**. Exercise is important to young people because it leads to lower body fat, and stronger bones and muscles. Exercise also has brain health benefits for school-aged children, including improved cognition (e.g., academic performance, memory) and reduced symptoms of depression.

Sleep

Sleep is important for everyone because chronically under-sleeping can lead to many health problems, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, poor mental health, and injuries. For

children in school, it also leads to difficulty paying attention, and behavior problems. For young athletes, lack of sleep can lead to both a higher risk of injury and decreased ability to heal after an injury. So, sleep is obviously important, but how much sleep do kids need? It varies by age, but generally:

- 6 to 12-year old's should sleep 9 to 12 hours per night
- 13 to 18-year old's need 8 to 10 hours per night

Eating a good diet, exercising and getting enough sleep will help your child grow and develop. It will also help keep them healthy now and set them up with the tools to stay healthy later in life. On top of that, making healthy lifestyle choices helps kids do better in the classroom.

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sleep.htm>
<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2014/08/19/peds.2014-1696.full.pdf>
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