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NUTRITIONAL  
INFORMATION TO  
HELP YOU PERFORM  
YOUR BEST



# NUTRITION MATTERS

## Myths and Mirages: What Ultimate Players Really Need to Know about Good Nutrition

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Carbs are bad for you. Fat is bad for you. A high-protein diet is bad for you.

So what is left to eat? It seems like no one can agree. There are so many mixed messages and fad diets and changes in the science, we are all dizzy from being pulled in every direction. Of course, there are many important things we have learned from years of research about what foods are good for us and why, but the most important lesson of all is that what may be healthy can mean very different things for different people.

Health and performance are tied to a complex variety of factors, including body weight, stress levels, activity, muscle composition, body mass, psychology, etc. Each individual is so different that it becomes very difficult to make sweeping generalizations about whether one food is healthy or not. To break down all these complex messages, below are several questions many of us have had about what we hear in the media every day regarding what foods are 'healthy' and what is bad for us. Ultimately, each athlete should decide what is healthy for him or her based on knowledge and experience. Following the 'myths' of the media can have dangerous consequences, and any changes to your diet should be supervised by a physician or nutritionist. Health and performance cannot be separated, and myths can lead to mirages if you are not careful to listen to your body and continue to search for credible sources of information.



### MYTH: GLUTEN-FREE MEANS THE FOOD IS HEALTHIER.

**Answer:** Sometimes, but not usually. Although some people have an actual allergy to gluten and tend to avoid bread products all together, those of us with no allergy do not necessarily need to avoid bread any more than other non-nutritive calories like sugar, juice, fake sweeteners, etc. While an allergy to gluten is now common (there is 20 times more gluten in wheat products now than there was 25 years ago), eating gluten-free products is not necessary unless you have this allergy. Gluten is just ONE of the potentially harmful proteins in wheat, and even gluten-free wheat products still contain many of the other harmful proteins. So eating gluten-free crackers, Cheez-its or cookies is no better for you and is just putting money in advertisers' pockets. Products made of other substances and labeled gluten-free (i.e., rice crackers, soy or tofu) are not made of wheat and are therefore gluten-free. But these foods are mainly empty calories as well, since they provide carbohydrates and immediate energy but not much other nutritional value. The carbohydrates and antioxidants in these foods, however, may be useful to athletes with higher

caloric needs, but altering the food to be gluten-free takes away most of the calories and fiber, making the food less healthy when consumed for that purpose.



### MYTH: DAIRY - IT DOES A BODY GOOD.

**Answer:** Sometimes, but most of the time, not really. Dairy is unusual in that it is a single food source that contains all three macronutrients: carbohydrates (the lactose), protein (casein and whey) and fat. The good part about dairy is the fat, and it's even better in organic dairy products. Since the harmful toxins, hormones and heavy metals are contained in the fat, organic milk is a better choice. The same is not necessarily true of the proteins and the lactose. Cheese is mostly casein and fat, which are both good for athletes – fat for energy and casein as the only slow-digesting protein available in a food source. However, cheese, especially aged cheeses like blue cheese, can cause a histamine response (meaning inflammation). These chemicals are also able to slip past the blood-brain barrier, causing morphine-like effects. Wine and cheese anyone?

Since most of us lose the ability to digest lactose at weaning, the carbohydrates in dairy (particularly milk) are also not so good. Not only does milk fill you up with quickly-releasing sugars, but the whey contains insulin (a fat-storing hormone). Fitness and marketing professionals have promoted the whey in protein powders since it is filtered and has been associated with a quicker uptake of carbohydrates post-exercise due to the insulin (and thus increases in performance).

However, this effect is only possible under certain training conditions in some people, and most of the time, excess insulin leads to weight gain, bloating and high blood sugar and replaces the desire for healthy, more nutritive foods.

### MYTH: FOODS WITH FAT ARE BAD FOR YOU.

**Answer:** It depends on what type of fat and whether your diet has an imbalance one way or the other. You need some of each type of fat, including saturated fat from animal sources, and other types of fat from oils and foods like nuts, olives, avocados, fish and shellfish. The typical American diet is overloaded with seed oils and saturated fat and does not include enough nut, olive and fish oils, since fried foods, animal fats and potato chips and French fries are so frequently consumed (McDonald's, anyone?). Seed oils are unstable to begin with, and when exposed to high heat, light and refining chemicals, the oils become very unstable and release free radicals into the body. Salad dressings and foods fried in vegetable oils (e.g., potato chips) should be avoided in a normal diet so as not to disrupt the balance of healthy saturated fats and fats from oils, nuts, olives, avocados, organic butter and dairy. Olive and nut oils are slightly more stable, but again make sure it is in a dark container and store in a cool, dark.

Since we are highly exposed to animal, seed and vegetable oil fats and are lacking in those from other sources, it is important for us to take every opportunity to have fish and fish oil and be aware of the balance of fats in our diets. Since the fat is the healthy part, try to get organic, high-fat dairy sources like butter, cottage cheese and ghee (Indian clarified butter without the milk proteins). Hydrogenated oils, a very unhealthy type of fat mistaken for a normal one and used to create faulty cell membranes (as well as many other dysfunctions), should be avoided whenever possible.

# NUTRITION MATTERS cont.

## MYTH: ATHLETES EAT JUNK FOOD ALL THE TIME AND STAY HEALTHY.

**Answer:** Although it is true that the food athletes typically eat during games and competition (e.g., animal crackers, juice, Gatorade, cookies, etc.) is not technically healthy since they are higher in carbs than nutrients, healthy here is a relative term. If by junk food we mean potato chips, fried foods, high amounts of animal fat, then no, that athlete would likely not be healthy. Even if they were thin, these individuals are likely to have 'silent' inflammation, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, etc., even at a healthy weight. However, carbohydrates in the form of whole foods with little to no added sugar are a very useful and necessary source of energy during competition where athletes are expending large amounts of energy in a short period of time. Carbohydrates are the only quickly accessible source of energy, as protein takes between one and four hours to digest, while fat can take up to nine.

Ideally, each athlete should experiment with what sources they like and tolerate best and have these foods accessible throughout the day. Animal crackers, Wheat Thins, bread, juice and fruit are all possible options. Liquid calories in the form of 100 percent juices and coconut water mixed with juice or water are also good alternatives for quickly digesting calories. Things like crackers, Fig Newtons, and fruit are best between points or during halftimes. Protein should be consumed during a break, with fat consumption in the early morning and after playing. These whole foods are better alternative to many foods contrived by the marketing and food industry, as more processed foods typically require more energy to break down and store than the benefits are worth.

## MYTH: EATING AT NIGHT OR WHEN YOU ARE STRESSED IS BAD FOR YOU.

**Answer:** Sometimes, but most of the time, eating when you are hungry is the healthiest option. If you are hungry, it's 10 p.m. and you are going to bed within an hour, a small snack of one or two handfuls of carbohydrates and some fat and protein is best, perhaps half a handful of each, since you don't want to go to bed on a full stomach. If you are going to bed in two hours, eat something with mostly carbs and a little more protein and fat. These guidelines are the same that apply to activity, so think about timing your meals and snacks before bed the same way you would before a workout. You may wake up not feeling so well if you eat a full meal late at night and go right to bed. This habit can also disrupt your normal hormonal response, so you could wake up starving as well.

There is a real concern that stress eating carbohydrates can lead to unhealthy eating patterns and binge eating, but the body is under breakdown when you are under stress. Cortisol is being released and telling the body, "Please eat, I'm breaking down here; I need some calories!" So it is actually important to increase your protein and good fat intake, as well as that of carbohydrates under certain circumstances and when under more stress, to replenish the proteins being broken down. This is exactly what happens during a workout, and you wouldn't starve yourself during or after a workout, right? The concern comes if you are continually using food to feed a negative thought or feeling. So make sure not to get so hungry that you turn to bad foods. Instead, eat a balanced meal or snack, and you will be much less likely to develop an unhealthy stress relationship with food.

**MYTH: IF YOU ARE AN ATHLETE TRYING TO LOSE WEIGHT, YOU SHOULD EAT FEWER CALORIES AND CONTINUE TO TRAIN AS HARD AS YOU CAN.**

**Answer:** Please never do this! Retaining fat is common when the body does not get enough protein or fluids and gets too many empty calories. It can also be a result of too much stress (high cortisol release) or too many artificial sweeteners and/or sugar. If the body is low in necessary nutrients like good fat and protein, it will tell you to eat high-fat, high-sugar foods to satisfy excessive hunger. But an hour later, all that energy is gone, and there is still not enough protein or good fat, so your body tells you it is hungry again. So getting adequate calories from protein and good fat (see MYTH: Foods with fat are bad for you) is step one. Step

two is actually addressing excess stress in your life, and/or REDUCING high-intensity exercise if you have a lot of stress. If you need to lose fat, you have to 'burn' it off with tough workouts and sprints, right? But actually the muscle burns fat most efficiently when you are at rest, but only if there is enough protein and good fat in the system to support your brain function, organs, tissue, immune system, stress and activity. Being under-nourished can lead to cortisol release, so exercising and creating more breakdown when the body is already low in nutrients is just going to release more cortisol and have the opposite of the desired effect. Low-intensity exercise is best under these circumstances to help release cortisol in small amounts over time and build the body's 'immunity' to cortisol for when it is released in response to real stress in everyday life.

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