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SPORTS NUTRITION FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

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September is here, and with it comes busy nights and weekends full of soccer practices, football games and other activities that keep kids (and parents) busy and active. Young athletes need to fuel their bodies with the proper nutrition so that they can grow, play and recover in the very best way.

Proper nutrition should start as soon as the day starts. Eating breakfast provides the essential nutrients needed to maintain energy and increase focus. It can also be a great time for a family to sit down and eat together, especially if busy sports schedules make family dinners nearly impossible.

A healthy breakfast should supply a balance of carbohydrate, protein and fat. While a quick bowl of cereal may seem like a good idea during the morning rush, a simple meal of scrambled eggs with cheese, whole wheat toast with peanut butter, or a cup of yogurt topped with fruit will keep kids feeling full and energized for longer.

Most young athletes are done eating lunch by around 12:30 pm, which means a healthy pre-practice snack is important to avoid the afternoon energy crash. Hummus and vegetables, apples and peanut butter, string cheese and whole grain crackers or a healthy fruit smoothie are all delicious, nutrient dense snacks that will help kids preform their best.

Older children may be inclined to try dietary supplements as a way to boost protein intake and build muscle. Instead encourage teens to first turn to foods rich in protein such as peanut and almond butters, eggs, lean chicken and turkey, and low-fat dairy like milk, cheese and yogurt. These foods will provide not only the protein they need to strengthen muscles, but other vitamins and minerals that enhance their overall health.

Post-workout meals and snacks are also important. A combination of protein and carbohydrate will help replenish depleted muscles and energy stores, so try things like low-fat chocolate milk or a peanut butter sandwich within 30 minutes of finishing the activity.

Keeping children hydrated is as important as keeping them fed. Water is the best choice for adults and kids alike, so make sure your athlete is supplied with a full water bottle as they head out the door. Electrolyte replacements, such as a sports drink, aren't needed unless your child is sweating heavily and exercising for longer than one hour at a time. Stick with water as their primary beverage throughout the day and during physical activity.

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Energy Bites

Source: Melskitchencafe.com

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup (3.5 ounces) old-fashioned oats
- ⅓ cup (1.25 ounces) ground flaxseed meal
- ⅔ to 1 cup (6-9 ounces) nut butter (see note)
- ¼ cup (3 ounces) honey
- Dash of vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt (more to taste, if needed)
- Add-ins: mini chocolate chips, shredded coconut, chopped nuts, dried fruit, chia seeds, etc.

DIRECTIONS:

In a food processor, add the oats and process until coarsely chopped. If you don't have a food processor coarsely chop the oats in a blender and add to a bowl.

Add the flaxseed meal, nut butter, honey, vanilla and salt. Process/mix until the mixture comes together into a soft but not overly sticky ball.

If the mixture is overly dry, add nut butter a tablespoon at a time and process/mix until the consistency is soft but not overly sticky or crumbly.

Remove the blade from the food processor, if using. Add any add-in ingredients, and mix with your hands until evenly combined.

Roll the dough into small balls (I use my small cookie scoop – #60) and place on a parchment-lined baking sheet or tray. Refrigerate until firm enough to stack in a lidded container or in a bag. The energy bites can be frozen for several months or refrigerated for a week or so.