Athletes don't have to be gourmet chefs to prepare healthy, satisfying meals that meet all their nutrient and energy requirements. They usually just need a little guidance on simple ways to achieve balanced nutrition all day long.

By Ingrid Skoog

Ingrid Skoog, MS, RD, CSSD, is a sports dietitian specializing in performance nutrition for collegiate and elite athletes in Eugene, Ore. She can be reached at: ingrid.skoog@oregonstate.edu.

Do you remember the first time you tried to prepare your own meal? Learning to cook is an exercise in trial and error, and sometimes there's quite a bit of error before you start producing meals you actually want to eat.

For athletes who need to prepare their own food, there's much more at stake than whether meals are disappointing in taste and texture. Athletes must fuel themselves for performance with a proper mix of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, and micronutrients. If their "kitchen literacy" is lacking, they're likely setting themselves up for diminished performance and poor overall health. Furthermore, many student-athletes have incredibly busy schedules and limited funds, which too often makes eating healthy—and sometimes eating at all—little more than an afterthought.

But with the right guidance, athletes who prepare their own food can fuel themselves effectively, even without any serious kitchen skills. The keys are to provide essential and realistic information on what a healthy and balanced meal consists of, and then offer specific, easy-to-follow advice on how to follow through from the grocery store to the plate.

THE BASICS

As a sports dietitian, my first instinct when talking to athletes about preparing their own meals is to discuss carbohydrate-to-protein ratios, ways to obtain the full spectrum of amino acids, and myriad other things important to optimal fueling. For athletes who are adept in the kitchen, that's an appropriate conversation to have. But for those who aren't, it's better to keep things as simple as possible. I tell these athletes that every meal should include three essential components:

1. A source of quality protein
2. A source of fiber
3. A complex (starch-based) carbohydrate.

If a meal covers these three areas, the odds are very good it will meet an athlete's nutrient needs.
Most athletes understand which types of foods fit those categories, but I don’t assume. If I find they’re not sure, again I keep things simple for them with short lists of staples that can be incorporated into many different meals. For protein, the list includes lean chicken, beef, peanut butter, beans, and eggs. For fiber, I'll mention high-fiber cereals, fruits and vegetables, and nuts and seeds. The complex carb list has a lot of crossover with the fiber list, and I'll also include items like oatmeal, brown rice, whole-wheat pasta, whole-wheat bread, and even low-fat popcorn.

To ensure that athletes meet their energy demands, it's also important to talk about when they eat. Too often, student-athletes who aren't skilled at preparing food for themselves simply skip meals, and consume more processed low nutrient-dense foods to get through the day, and then have one large meal at night when they're extremely hungry. Sports dietitians call this back-loading.

We want them to do the opposite—to front-load their food intake by starting with a healthy breakfast and then eating meals and snacks throughout the day, so the energy and nutrients they consume all day long can be used to improve training and recovery.

The benefits of front-loading are obvious. Athletes will find they have more energy during workouts and practices, they'll be more alert in class and throughout their daily tasks, and they'll generally feel better. But nutrition research suggests other advantages as well.

Athletes who front-load their food intake tend to have better body compositions to meet their sport's unique training and competition needs, and they respond faster to weight management plans. They're also better hydrated during the day, perform better during workouts, recover more quickly afterward, and even experience an immune system boost that helps ward off common illnesses such as colds.

Once you've covered these big-picture basics with athletes, the next step is to get specific with simple, nutritious meal and snack ideas for all times of the day. And as you'll see, simple doesn't have to mean boring.

**MEAL PLANNING**

*Breakfast.* Many athletes' biggest food-related mistake is eating too small a breakfast or skipping it entirely. Even if they eat a full lunch, those who skip breakfast will consistently underperform in afternoon training sessions and are likely to overeat at night.

Often, the real culprit is simply time. Student-athletes stay up late doing schoolwork or socializing, have an early class or workout, and don't want to get up any earlier than they have to. Of course, getting enough sleep is critical to athletic performance as well, but the extra minutes gained by hitting the snooze button would be better spent eating an easy-to-prepare breakfast.
The meal ideas in the "Breakfast" sidebar below can all be prepared in 10 minutes or less, with nothing more than basic kitchen equipment. Some don't require heating at all, and those that do can be zapped in a microwave. Simple breakfasts are ideal for before a morning workout—a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on wheat bread takes two minutes to make, and it goes great with a green-tip banana and a glass of low-fat milk.

Breakfast shouldn't always be thought of as a single meal. It can be broken into two parts separated by an early class or lifting session—sandwich before, fruit and a bagel with peanut butter afterward. This will improve recovery from morning training, encourage continued fueling for later training sessions, and decrease the likelihood of gorging at night.

Some athletes have told me they don't have an appetite in the morning. If skipping breakfast is a longstanding habit for them, this is probably true, but like any other bad habit, it can be changed gradually. I recommend starting with liquids like milk or juice, then moving to soft solids like yogurt or oatmeal, then finally to actual solid food. Once the body grows used to morning fuel, athletes will start feeling hungry upon waking up.

Lunch. When the midday meal is followed closely by a team practice, this is the most important time of day to consume quality carbohydrates for fueling. It's also essential to choose foods that are cleared quickly from the stomach to avoid feelings of sluggishness during activity. Higher-fat foods take longer to digest, so these in particular should be avoided.

One mistake athletes commonly make is having just a large salad for lunch. Salads are filling, made with healthy vegetables, and have a high water content to help with hydration, so they must be a great choice, right? In fact, salads alone are not a smart lunchtime meal before afternoon workouts—most vegetables are not high-density sources of carbohydrates or protein, so while they may fill you up, they don't provide a "full tank" of fuel for a workout or practice. In addition, high-fat extras like dressing, cheese, and croutons may contribute to sluggishness in practice while also wreaking havoc on weight management goals.

For athletes who want a salad at lunchtime, I recommend pasta salads. This convenient and easy-to-prepare alternative packs more carbohydrates than veggie salads, and it's a great way to make use of leftover odds and ends of cut up meat, cheese, and vegetables.

In the "Lunch" sidebar below, each meal idea offers a great source of midday fuel. I've included a special section for meals less than two hours before a workout, again with the priority of limiting fat intake while still obtaining quality carbohydrates. All these lunches require little prep time and little to no cooking skill, and they're easy to pack in Tupperware or a lunch bag for eating on the go.
Dinner. By dinnertime, athletes are tired and already thinking about homework or social commitments. If they've been fueling adequately all day long, they should be hungry but not starving, and ready to sit down to a reasonably sized meal. By avoiding back-loading, they help themselves meet body composition goals and will have an easier time winding down their day and getting a full night's sleep.

Dinner is most likely to be the student-athlete's one "sit down" meal of the day, so it's the best time to customize their simple meal plan to assist with individual body composition goals. For instance, those looking to build muscle can place a larger emphasis on higher-calorie, protein-rich foods like red meat, poultry, nuts and legumes, while those looking to lose weight can fill up on high-fiber, low-calorie fruits and vegetables.

As a general rule, an optimal dinner plate should be broken into three parts: Roughly 50 percent should be higher-fiber carbohydrates like bread, other grains, and starchy vegetables such as potatoes, 25 percent should be whole vegetables and fruits, and 25 percent should be low-fat proteins. The portions should be large enough that the athlete won't feel hungry again later in the evening, with the possible exception of a late-night snack.

The options in the "Dinner" sidebar below are broken down by the two most common body composition goals for athletes--muscle mass gain and weight loss. For those looking to lose weight, portion size is especially important: If they skimp on the portions of healthy dinner foods in an attempt to take in fewer calories, they'll likely be tempted to eat more later in the evening, and it's easy to make bad choices when you're hungry late at night. Meanwhile, those looking to gain weight or muscle mass should avoid drinking too much with their meals, as the extra fluid will cause feelings of fullness to set in more quickly.

Between-meal snacks. Snacks can help or hinder athletes. They help by spreading energy and nutrient intake throughout the day and providing fuel that is appropriate for pre-training and recovery needs. They hinder if an athlete chooses high-fat, sugary foods offering empty calories and not much else. Another problem is that too much snacking can interfere with hunger at mealtimes.

The options in the "Snack Time" sidebar below shouldn't serve as meal substitutes, but they are an excellent way for athletes to give themselves a quick energy boost and add more calories, healthy fats, and protein to their daily intake if desired. Fruit and vegetable snacks are also a great way to boost fluid intake to help with hydration.

Energy bars are generally healthy, very convenient, and an easy way to get some extra carbs before or even during a workout. But many times, athletes who can't find time for lunch in their busy schedule will snack on an energy bar as a substitute to satisfy their hunger. Once a workout begins, the roughly 200 calories in that bar will be burned off in the first half hour and the athlete will
experience a "crash." It's critical to stress that snacks are a supplement to, not replacement for, complete meals.

HELPFUL HINTS
Even the easy meal ideas described above can be made more convenient with a little forethought. Share these pointers with your athletes for extra help with food prep:

Plan for tomorrow. If you're cooking or grilling chicken breasts, don't just make one or two for the upcoming meal. Prepare four or more, cut up the extras into cubes or strips, and put them in pasta sauce, salads, and other dishes. Likewise, one large pan or pot of a rice or pasta dish can be split into plastic containers and enjoyed over several days. Another idea is making a simple burrito filling mix (beans, canned corn, salsa, canned chicken, and cumin) in a sealed bowl. It only takes a minute to wrap a burrito once the filling is pre-made.

Buy in bulk. All the meal suggestions in this article involve low-cost ingredients, but budget-conscious athletes can save even more by getting granola, pasta, rice, and oatmeal from the bulk bins at the grocery store. Bulk is also a great way to try new foods or seasonings because you can buy a small amount. And when you crave a sweet treat like chocolate candy, you can get just enough to hit the spot without having to worry about the rest of the box sitting in the cupboard, tempting you to eat more.

Buy canned and frozen fruits and veggies. Choose canned fruits packed in their own juices, and stock up on frozen fruit in the summer when prices are lowest. Frozen vegetables are great because they do not spoil as fast and can be quickly added to pasta, chili, and rice dishes to boost nutrient and fiber content. Canned veggies have a long shelf life, and you can reduce the sodium content by simply rinsing them before use.

Choose condiments wisely. A healthy salad, sandwich, or burrito isn't so healthy if it's smothered in high-fat dressing, mayonnaise, or gourmet sauce. Choose low-fat alternatives instead, or better yet, try pouring on some salsa—it's delicious on a wide variety of foods and provides an extra dose of veggies.

Watch the fat. Avoid trans fats whenever possible (they're now clearly marked on all nutrition labels), and use the lower-fat versions of cheese, ground beef, and other fattier foods. Method of preparation can also greatly affect fat content—the same chicken breast is healthier when cooked on a grill than when prepared in a saucepan with butter or oil and breading.

Use a shopping list. If you know in advance what items you need to make the dishes you'll be preparing, you'll save money and avoid having excess food lying around. There's also a psychological effect to having all the ingredients for a simple dish in your kitchen—you may as well stick to your plan and make that dish, since you already paid for everything.
Sports nutrition is all about athletes reaching their potential. Even those who don't have the time, energy, or skill to prepare complex meals can still fuel themselves optimally to meet their training and body composition goals. With a little guidance, everyone can enjoy the benefits of a little home cooking.

Sidebars: **BREAKFAST**

*To Eat at Home*
- 1 cup of quick-cook oatmeal with your choice of peanut butter, raisins, chopped nuts, brown sugar, and/or honey mixed in
- Piece of whole fruit
- Low-fat or skim milk
- French toast (frozen) with 1-2 tbsp. of peanut butter and light maple syrup
- Piece of whole fruit
- Low-fat or skim milk

- Low-fat yogurt
- Low-fat granola with added nuts and raisins*
- Piece of whole fruit
- Low-fat or skim milk

- Peanut butter and jelly sandwich on wheat bread*
- Piece of whole fruit
- Low-fat or skim milk

*Easy to Pack*
- Yogurt parfait: fruit, granola, and yogurt
- Piece of whole fruit

- Bagel with peanut butter*
- Milk or orange juice

- Fruit smoothie made with yogurt, whole fruit, juice, and a soy or whey protein powder*

- Bag of trail mix*
- Piece of whole fruit
- Milk or orange juice

* = Especially good choice for athletes looking to gain weight

For any meal calling for peanut butter, other nut butters can be substituted as well, such as cashew or almond butter.

**LUNCH**

*To Eat at Home*
- Turkey chili
• Low-fat whole-grain crackers
• Piece of whole fruit
• Low-fat milk
• Tuna in pita bread with low-fat ranch or other dressing
• Low-fat milk

• Baked potato with salsa and low-fat sour cream
• Refried beans
• Low-fat milk or fruit juice

• Bean soup: lentil, black bean, or minestrone
• Low-fat whole-grain crackers
• Low-fat milk or fruit juice

**Easy to Pack**
• Hummus or bean dip
• Low-fat whole-grain crackers or baked chips
• Carrots and celery or whole fruit
• Yogurt or low-fat milk

• Pasta salad: Pasta with cubes of lean meat (ham, turkey, chicken), low-fat Italian dressing, and/or chopped veggies
• Low-fat milk or fruit juice

• Peanut butter and jelly on wheat bread
• Piece of whole fruit or a fruit salad
• Low-fat milk or juice

• Low-fat fruit yogurt
• Piece of whole fruit
• Bagel or baggie of high-protein cereal
• Low-fat milk or juice

**Less than Two Hours Before Afternoon Workout**
• 1/2 cup of yogurt with 1/4 cup of whole-grain cereal
• Chicken noodle soup
• Low-fat crackers
• Low-fat milk

• 1/2 PB and J sandwich
• 1/2 banana
• Water or fruit juice

• 1/2 cup of quick-cook oats
• Banana
• Water or fruit juice
DINNER
For Losing Weight
• Grilled chicken breast
• Two cups of cooked or raw veggies
• Piece of whole fruit
• Large glass of low-fat milk
• Club salad: lean lunch meat, low-fat cottage cheese, two cups of veggies, beans (garbanzo, pinto, etc.), and low-fat salad dressing
• Whole fruit or fruit salad
• Low-fat milk or fruit juice

• Simple stir fry: sautéed vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, celery, carrots, etc.) with chicken, pork, thinly sliced beef, and/or scrambled egg
  Use teriyaki or soy sauce as seasoning

• Baked potato topped with low-fat turkey chili and grated low-fat cheese or parmesan cheese
• Piece of whole fruit
• Low-fat milk or fruit juice

For Gaining Muscle
• Grilled chicken, pork, fish, or steak
• White or brown rice
• Steamed or raw carrots
• Low-fat milk (after meal)

• Pasta with tomato sauce, cooked extra-lean ground beef, and parmesan cheese
• Dinner roll with trans fat-free margarine
• Low-fat milk (after meal)

• Lasagna with beef or chicken and extra tomato sauce
• Plain French bread or whole-grain rolls
• Low-fat milk (after meal)

• Large bean, cheese, and chicken burrito with salsa
• Small mixed green salad with Italian dressing
• Fruit juice (after meal)

SNACK TIME
For Losing Weight
• Low-fat popcorn with seasoning salt
• Whole fruit
• Sugar-free hot chocolate
• Low-fat pudding or fruit cup
• Whole-grain pretzels
• Baked chips and bean dip
• Veggies dipped in ranch seasoning mixed with low-fat cottage cheese
• Low-fat plain yogurt mixed with cut fruit

For Gaining Muscle
• PB and J or tuna sandwich
• Fruit and nut trail mix
• Fruit smoothie with added yogurt, peanut butter, or protein powder
• Handful of dry roasted almonds, hazelnuts, or soy nuts
• Lean meat sandwich

We welcome your feedback on this article. Please e-mail us at:
tcfeedback@momentummedia.com

Copyright© 2009 MAG, Inc. All rights reserved.