

Football Food

Nutritional advice for football players, parents and coaches

Sport nutrition, diet or food and drink, for football players is becoming increasingly scientific and recognised for its importance in the game of football. Almost every professional club will have a nutritionist or similar expert advisor for their team. This article covers the most important principles of sport nutrition for amateur players and coaches.

Why is sport nutrition or diet important in football?

1. Food provides us with energy for our muscles, brain and other organs. Football requires plenty of exercise, and therefore it is important to have energy available to us during the game/training. The energy available to us at any particular time depends on our blood sugar levels.
2. If we over-eat, we become over-weight. The heavier we are, the more work our muscles have to do to take us the same distance. This reduces our stamina, and our ability to accelerate quickly. If we under-eat, we can become weak and our overall health can decline, because we are not getting enough nutrients.
3. A healthy diet improves our general level of health, and can help us recover more quickly from injuries.
4. Along with a program of fitness training, our diet can help us develop stamina and improve athletic performance.
5. Diet is essential for our growth, and development.

What to eat and when to eat it

The timing of the meals you consume is important. On the day of a match the intake of fat and protein should be restricted, as these nutrients require a relatively long time to be digested. Plan to have your pre-match meal 3-4 hours before the match.

Your pre-match meal should be:

- High in carbohydrate, low in fat, low in protein, low in fibre
- Not too bulky, and easy to digest.

Consume foods such as:

- Breakfast cereal with low fat milk

- Toast or bread with jam/honey
- Sandwiches with banana/honey/jam
- Pasta/rice with low fat sauce
- Muffins
- Baked potato
- Fruit and orange juice
- Energy bars

A snack high in carbohydrate may be eaten about 2 hours before the match, however the time reference is only a guideline as there are great individual differences in the ability to digest food. It is a good idea for you to experiment with a variation of foods at different times before training sessions. Foods such as toast, bread or crumpets with jam/honey, sweetened cereal and low fat milk, muffins, orange juice and jelly sweets could be consumed.

Once the game/training is over, fluids should be replaced and carbohydrate should be consumed as soon as possible to promote recovery of glycogen stores. **During the cool down you should consume fluids and small snacks, such as jelly sweets, jaffa cakes and jammy dodgers.** As soon as possible you should aim to consume a meal which is high in carbohydrates.

Foods such as:

- Pasta, spaghetti, rice, noodles, low fat pasta sauce
- Bread
- Potatoes
- Baked beans should be consumed during this period.

Carbohydrate rich foods must be the main source of your diet. Table 1 lists foods, which contain a lot of carbohydrate. You should aim to consume the main bulk of your diet from complex carbohydrates. Simple carbohydrates should not be consumed in large quantities and are more useful as snacks between workouts, or to top up your energy intake. The carbohydrate you consume should be balanced with a healthy intake of protein, low fat and plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Table 1 Carbohydrate-Rich Foods

Complex Carbohydrates	Simple Carbohydrates	Mixture of Complex and Simple Carbohydrates
Bread	Sugar	Cakes
Pasta	Jam	Biscuits
Rice	Honey	Puddings
Noodles	Yoghurt	Sweet Pastries
Oats	Fromage Frais	Cheesecake
Breakfast Cereals (unsweetened)	Ice Cream	Breakfast Cereals (sweetened)
Pulses (beans, lentils, peas)	Jelly	Bananas
Baked Beans	Raisins	Grapes
Apricots, Peaches	Full sugar cordials	Oranges
Potatoes	Jelly sweets	
Parsnips, sweetcorn	Soft drinks (Lucozade, sprite, energy drinks)	

If you do not consume enough carbs (kcal/energy), then you will not have enough energy to complete the match (or training) and subsequently your performance will suffer, and more importantly you will be more susceptible to injury.

Fluids

We've done good food and we've looked at what snacks can boost the body during and after a match or training session. Now let's look at what you should drink.

The water lost from the body during sweating needs to be replaced to stop you getting tired quickly, and also speed up the recovery process – that means feeling fitter and sharper afterwards a lot sooner.

These checks will help players:

- Weight – 1kg of weight lost during a training session is equal to 1 litre of fluid lost.

- The 'pee test' – If your urine is dark coloured, it means you need to have a drink. Lots of trips to the toilet, producing lots of clear coloured urine, shows you've taken on enough fluid.
- Thirst – Being thirsty is an unreliable indicator of when you need to have a drink. If you're thirsty, you're actually already partly dehydrated so if you finish a training session and you're gasping it's a giveaway you haven't taken enough fluid on board.

What's best to drink?

For footballers, the best fluid to drink is:

- Diluted carbohydrate/electrolyte solution

In plain English, that's the kind of stuff you'll find in stuff like Isostar, Lucozade Sport and Gatorade.

When should I drink?

Ideally, it's best to drink before, during and after a training session, as well as drinking frequently during a match.

How much should I drink?

Only a little – but often. If you drink too much too quickly, you run the risk of getting a stomach upset.

Food for thought

Here's a fact: young footballers can have all the skills in the world but without the proper nutritional support, they won't be as fit as they could be and their performances will suffer.

They won't be able to train as hard or as long, so won't improve their play, and during games run the risk of getting tired.

How they perform during games and training depends on what you eat and drink before, during and after each match or training session. If you eat and drink the right stuff, you will improve. Follow our advice and you will be a bundle of energy out on the pitch!

First off, let's look at the essential nutrients young footballers need to be eating, and the foods they're found in.

Nutrient found in

- Simple carbohydrates: Sweets, cakes, soft drinks, jam
- Complex carbohydrates: Rice, bread, pasta, potatoes, cereals, fruit
- Saturated fats: Butter, margarine, cheese, pasties
- Unsaturated fats: Sunflower oil, salmon, nuts
- Protein: Milk, chicken, eggs, fish, yoghurt
- Vitamins and minerals: Fruit, vegetables, dairy products
- Fibre: Seeds, peas, beans
- Water: Foods, drinks, formulated sports drinks

Footballers need increased energy to gain that extra edge, and that's most commonly found in carbohydrate. Now, in a healthy diet, 55-60% of it should come from carbohydrate, but for footballers, it's even higher - as much as 70%!

Of course, players need other nutrients too and it's not easy to get the perfect intake of carbohydrate from eating a regular three meals a day. The way to do it is by snacking - snacks play a crucial role in a player's diet, especially if eaten immediately after training or a match. That's when the energy stores in the muscles which have just been working are best refuelled.

Snack Attack! These snacks are high in carbohydrate but low in fat

- Banana, jam or honey sandwiches
- Muesli bars or sweetened popcorn
- Fruit cake, currant buns, scones, American muffins
- Crumpets, bagels, English muffins, scotch pancakes
- Pop Tarts, rusks and cereal
- Jelly cubes
- Jaffa cakes, wine gums, jelly babies
- Low fat rice pudding, bread pudding
- Yoghurts and milkshakes
- Fruit and dried fruit

Easy Steps to Improve Your Diet

Here are some easy steps to improve your diet.

- Eat breakfast. This is the most important meal of the day, so it should not be skipped.
- Reduce the amount of coffee, tea and cola that you drink, and replace them with water, fruit juice or other healthy drinks.

- Eat healthier snacks. Eat carrots, dry breakfast cereal, nuts, rice cakes, rye, crisp breads, bagels or toast rather than crisps, chocolate bars and sweets.
- Reduce sugary foods, for example by eliminating sugar from tea, coffee and breakfast cereal.
- Reduce your intake of fatty foods. For example, reduce the amount of butter, margarine, fatty meat, beef burgers, chips and crisps that you eat.
- Drink plenty of fluids before a match, at half-time and after the match, particularly in hot, humid weather.
- Avoid sugary snacks immediately before the start of a match. Fruit, such as bananas, or other carbohydrate-rich snacks are better. Avoid over-eating before a match.
- Replace fluids, salts and carbohydrates that you have used during the match (see below).

Diet and Recovery After A Match

Here are four tips to help you recover from a hard match or training session.

- Rest, and make sure you have enough sleep.
- Replace your body salts by eating. Most foods naturally contain salts, but fruit juices are particularly good choices, and these will also replace fluids.
- Replace your body carbohydrates by eating carbohydrate-rich foods within two hours after a match or training session.
- Drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost through sweat.