NUTRITION

FOR THE GYMNASTICS STUDENT-ATHLETE



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> I'm a sophomore on the gymnastics team, and this year I want to earn a place in the uneven-bars lineup. I wonder whether losing a few pounds would make my routines easier and improve my chances. Our team already does plenty of conditioning, but I could add sessions on my own or eat fewer calories to lower my weight. Perhaps doing both would work best! How should I work toward my goal?

From an energy standpoint, gymnastics relies mainly on anaerobic activity. The rebounds and forceful landings in each event cause substantial breakdown of muscle, bone and connective tissue. Gymnasts need fuel for repeated high-intensity efforts and must replace depleted energy before their next training session.

Refueling well can be harder when calorie intake must sometimes be limited to maintain a lean physique and an appropriate body weight. Gymnasts also know they are measured against an established "perfect form." This pressure can sometimes encourage extreme efforts to match that ideal.

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HEALTHY FOODS: WHAT TO CHOOSE

Good breakfast carbohydrate options include:

- 100 percent whole-wheat toast
- cereal providing three to five grams of fiber per serving
- oatmeal
- sandwich/bagel thins
- fresh fruit/berries

Good protein choices include:

- eggs
- Greek yogurt
- low-fat dairy
- skim chocolate milk
- 1 percent string cheese
- deli lunch meat (turkey, ham, roast beef, chicken)
- nuts
- beef jerky

Healthy fat options include:

- fish
- peanut butter
- a variety of nuts
- avocado
- nut butters

PRESEASON

For most college programs, preseason is the toughest part of the training cycle. Meeting your nutrition needs is especially important during this period.

Carbohydrates. Hard workouts, often twice daily, can require more carbohydrate than you expect. Keep in mind that carbs provide your main source of fuel.

- Your body needs roughly five to seven grams per pound of body weight (lb. BW) during heavy training from August through October.
- As training eases near the end of the semester and routines take shape, carbohydrate needs may fall to five to six grams per pound.
- Breakfast and lunch should supply most of your carbs: breakfast powers the day, and lunch usually precedes your demanding practice.

Protein. Needs usually stay at 1.2 to 1.4 grams/lb. BW. Protein is easy to overlook in this phase, yet lean protein each time you eat helps you get more from training, feel satisfied and protect lean muscle.

Fat. Healthy fats are essential because they help your body absorb the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K.

- Include healthy fat sources in your diet, including fish, avocado, peanut butter, other nut butters and assorted nuts.
- Fish oil supplies omega-3s (EPA and DHA), which have anti-inflammatory effects that help reduce inflammation. They also support healthy skin, protect the heart and help lubricate joints.

Vitamins and minerals. Many gymnasts use a multivitamin. Research suggests one may be unnecessary with a healthy, balanced diet, although a quality product can help cover nutrient gaps. Calcium supports bones, especially after a stress fracture. Vitamin D3 may also merit consideration because indoor training can limit direct sun exposure. Talk with your sports dietitian or athletic trainer before taking any of these supplements.

COMPETITION SEASON

Nutrition needs shift during competition as training becomes less intense, travel adds demands, and you must perform at your best each week. The aim changes from building muscle and getting competition-ready to preserving the lean mass gained in preseason.

Carbohydrates. With less conditioning, lower overall training intensity and more attention



to routines, carbohydrate needs drop to four to six grams per pound.

- Concentrate your carbohydrate intake at breakfast, lunch and practice.
- Bring a snack for practice if your energy begins to fade.
- Protein bars, fresh fruit, applesauce, fruit squeezes and granola bars provide energy during practice and usually do not leave you feeling bloated.

Protein. Requirements may match preseason levels as you work to preserve muscle and counter body-composition changes that often accompany a shift in training.

- Recovery fueling grows even more important to your eating plan as weekly competition places considerable stress on your body.
- Within 30 minutes after each workout or conditioning session, take in carbohydrates and protein in a 3:1 or 4:1 ratio. Recovery foods include fat-free chocolate milk, hard-boiled eggs, Greek yogurt, some protein bars, and peanut butter with banana.
- Whichever recovery food you select, eat it within that window. Recovery fueling is vital to your success.

CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON/ POSTSEASON

Championship season is the goal of your year's training. Practices are shorter and your routines well established. You have a week off between the conference championship and regionals, then another free weekend before nationals. These welcome breaks offer time to catch up on sleep and seek extra treatment for lingering problems.

- Carbohydrate intake should now be four grams per pound, the main macronutrient adjustment at this stage. Protein, fat, vitamin and mineral needs stay unchanged.
- By now, you should be comfortable with your nutrition routine. Keep working hard and fueling for performance despite fatigue, and continue your recovery nutrition.
- Remember that the championship schedule includes a practice day. Pack competition snacks with that in mind, covering before, during and after the meet.





OFFSEASON

Offseason macronutrient needs depend on your training capacity and body composition.

Preparing for success. Set nutrition goals now to support your next preseason. Give your body time to rest and heal while continuing to eat well.

Match carbohydrate intake to your activity. Very active athletes may need more carbs. During injury recovery, protein needs may double to support the body's additional healing work.

Whatever your needs, rest well, eat plenty of fruit and vegetables for vitamins and minerals, choose lean protein (chicken, turkey, ham, roast beef, 93/7 lean ground beef, tofu, legumes and low-fat dairy), and drink ample water.



Moving to the next level. Following your nutrition plan consistently each day can boost your performance. Whether you are in training, on vacation, injured or resting, keep a nutrition plan in place.

- Avoid excluding food groups unless you have an allergy or intolerance. Every food group contributes to success.
- You need not fear food: it supplies fuel and affects performance. Take charge of your nutrition. Eat carbs around activity, with complex sources at breakfast and lunch to meet your activity needs.
- Include protein in each meal and snack to protect lean muscle, increase fullness and help manage appetite.
- Healthy fats add flavor and help fight inflammation. They are essential for heart and joint health and for absorbing fat-soluble vitamins.
- Get vitamins and minerals by eating plenty of fruits and vegetables. Aim for every color each day to cover essential vitamins. If considering a multivitamin, calcium or vitamin D supplement, speak with your sports dietitian or athletic trainer before buying or taking it.

Written by SCAN/CPSDA Registered Dietitians (RDs). For advice on customizing an eating plan to meet your nutrition goals, consult an RD who specializes in sports, particularly a Board-Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD). Find a qualified RD at www.scandpg.org or www.sportsRD.org.