SOFTBALL SPORTS NUTRITION



PHOTOS: NCAA PHOTOS AND SHUTTERSTOCK

> My hitting always seems to decline in game two of a doubleheader. I feel tired and less mentally sharp. Could the foods I eat at my pregame meal play a part? What should I eat and drink during the first game and after it finishes?

Collegiate softball is a fast, highly competitive sport that demands a distinctive blend of strength, speed, power and agility. Excelling also takes sharp focus, quick decisions and split-second reactions. The dynamic, demanding season includes 50 or more regular-season games for most teams. Nutrition and hydration influence every part of your softball game. Use these fueling strategies to make the most of your training and performance.

Information provided by NCAA SPORT SCIENCE INSTITUTE · Sports, Cardiovascular, and Wellness Nutrition, a dietetic practice group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics · C·P·S·D·A· FUELING VICTORY

NCAA is a National Collegiate Athletic Association trademark.

YEAR-ROUND FUELING

PRESEASON (December, January)
Fueling priorities:

- Support skill work and team play development
- Build strength, speed and power

Preseason is an ideal time to build eating and hydration habits that sustain performance all season. Yet softball student-athletes' key training months overlap fall exams and winter break, which can limit team sessions, routines and consistency. Build reliable fueling habits despite changing schedules and training. Keep meals and snacks as close to your usual times as possible, avoid skipping meals, and plan ahead so nutritious options are always available.

WINTER BREAK

Time at home or away from the team can disrupt your fueling plan, but it need not. Plan ahead to keep progressing. Enjoy the break and some favorite foods, while keeping strong fueling habits and routines most of the time. A holiday meal and a few treats fit most training plans; a full week of indulging can affect your next games.

DURING THE SEASON

(February, March, April)
Fueling priorities:

- Perform at your best
- Recover faster between games

Game-day nutrition is vital to softball success. Use the fueling guide below to plan how you eat on game days.

FUELING GUIDE FOR GAME DAY

	FUELING MIX	MEAL IDEAS	LIMIT / AVOID	POINTERS
PREGAME MEAL (Three to four hours before the game)	Lean protein + Sustained-energy carbs + A little fat + Colorful fruit or veg + Fluids	Grilled chicken or salmon + Rice or sweet potato + Butter + Green beans + Water OR Scrambled eggs + Oatmeal + Peanut butter mixed into oatmeal + Dried cranberries + Orange juice and water	Fried or spicy foods, main-course salads, creamy dressings or sauces, sweets, high-fiber foods, caffeine, soda, and unfamiliar foods or drinks	Don't leave out protein! It helps your fuel last through the game. Hotel breakfast bars may offer boiled eggs, yogurt, milk or peanut butter. For afternoon meals, choose meat or beans. Or bring your own sports bars.
TOP-UP FUEL (Before warm-ups)	Tolerance differs by athlete. Protein (if desired) + Carbs + Fluids	Sports bar + water OR Banana + sports drink OR Fig bars + water	Quick-release sugars, unless you've had a solid pregame meal. Avoid caffeine.	Add fuel to build energy stores for the game and help keep hunger away.
GAME-TIME FUEL (Throughout play)	Carbs + Fluids	Sports drinks, bites of sports bars, fresh or dried fruit, fruit strips, or trail mix.		Hunger during play signals that you are low on fuel. Eat and drink during games before hunger and thirst appear.
RECOVERY FUELING (Right after the game)	Protein + Carbs + Fluids	Chocolate milk ½ PB&J + water Trail mix + sports drink Cheese/crackers + water		Repair, refuel and rehydrate as soon as possible after exercise. Recovery food also gives you more time before your postgame meal. Waiting 90 minutes to two hours is reasonable if you've already had recovery fuel.
POSTGAME MEAL	Protein + Carbs + Fluids	Eat a balanced meal; guidelines can be more flexible than pregame. Prioritize fluids!	Caffeine	

When dining with teammates at team meals or restaurants, put performance nutrition first. Travel, tempting restaurant food and someone else's bill can make overeating or poor choices appealing. Let your drive to win and be your best guide you. Choose foods and drinks you enjoy that fit the winning formula, and save indulgences for other times.

Student-athletes juggle classes and game preparation all season, and nutrition can easily get pushed aside.

Remember: nutrition on game day depends on the quality of your fueling all week.

Using energy drinks to offset poor eating and lifestyle habits misses the point and is strongly discouraged.

POSTSEASON/CHAMPIONSHIP

Fueling priorities:

- Perform at your best
- Recover faster between games
- Optimize hydration

Adapt the fueling formula you have used all season to new game times, climates and eating situations. Keep familiar staples handy: oatmeal packets, nuts, nut butters, sports bars, dried fruit and similar foods. Between doubleheader games, consider doubling your usual recovery intake. If chocolate milk is normally your recovery fuel before a postgame meal, try it with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Stay hydrated, especially as early summer gets hotter. Nerves, excitement, heat and dehydration curb appetite, so create a fueling schedule and stick to it.



OFFSEASON

Fueling priorities:

- Enhance your conditioning
- Work on body composition
- Try new fueling approaches

SUMMER

Every student-athlete needs time to rest and recover. Still, the offseason may be the ideal time to put nutrition in season! Training is less intense, so carbohydrate needs are lowest during these months. Do not avoid carbs. Choose smaller side servings of whole grains and fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables at each meal. Use the offseason to focus on major changes in body composition. Many players spend the summer improving cardiovascular fitness, building strength and conditioning, and learning new cooking skills. Too much fuel and frequent poor choices in summer create extra work for fall training. Begin the year in great shape.

FALL PREPARATION

Work on your own and with teammates to build habits that will carry you through the season.

- Spot gaps in your diet. Do you miss breakfast? Eat too little by day, then become overly hungry at night? Which nutrition topics would you like to understand better?
- Recognize your strengths. Do you stay well hydrated? Do you consistently eat five fruits and vegetables a day?
- Build on those strengths. Ask coaches, teammates and support staff to help improve weak areas in your diet.

Fall is for refining skills that win spring games, and nutrition is part of that work!



YOUR PERSONAL NEEDS

Every successful college softball player brings distinct physical traits, skills and athletic experience. Build a goal-specific plan with a sports registered dietitian, your coaches, sports medicine staff, and strength and conditioning coaches. Use these tips to shape your personal plan:

- Avoid comparing yourself with standards or teammates. Aim for positive personal gains and improved body composition.
- Team up to strengthen your nutrition plan: cook together, choose healthy restaurant meals, hydrate on the field, and consistently follow recovery nutrition habits.
- Try new foods, ideas and fueling approaches. A small adjustment may be just what turns effort into winning performance!

NUTRITION FOR SOFTBALL

A balanced diet that adapts to training volume and intensity helps softball players thrive. A yearlong fueling plan matters. Remember:

- Choose a plan you enjoy, can put into practice and sustain, and that positively supports your performance.
- Meal timing matters for softball success. Have medium-sized meals and small snacks all day, roughly every three hours. Eating often helps sustain energy and optimize muscle mass and recovery. Many student-athletes benefit from this routine:
  - Breakfast
  - Lunch
  - Pretraining snack (adjust timing if practice is not in the afternoon)
  - Recovery snack (within 30 minutes after workouts end)
  - Dinner
  - An extra snack

  Busy student-athletes often eat too little by day, when energy is needed most, then overeat at night. Aim to eat two-thirds of the day's food before dinner.
- Include lean protein in meals and snacks: lean meat, poultry, fish, seafood, eggs, tofu, soy, beans, milk, cheese, yogurt, nuts, seeds, and peanut or other nut butters. Regularly add healthy fats from oils, oil-based dressings, nuts, seeds, fish and avocado.
- Carbohydrate needs vary most across the training year. Carbs are softball's main fuel, and your needs differ from those of athletes in more aerobic sports, such as soccer or cross country. Tough training and demanding game schedules increase your needs; the offseason and easier days lower them. Favor long-lasting carbs from whole grains: whole-grain bread, brown rice, oatmeal, whole-grain cereals, corn and popcorn, plus beans, vegetables, many fruits and dairy foods.
- Many people choose the same 10 foods 90 percent of the time. Eat a wider variety to obtain the micronutrients you need.
- Be selective with sugary drinks. Reserve sports drinks for during and after practices and games. Follow the "3-H" guide: choose them over water when it is hot, exercise is hard, and it will last over an hour. Otherwise, hydrate with water. Avoid drinking your calories: soda, lemonade, lattes and other sweet drinks can add up to excessive amounts and impair performance.



Softball players benefit from a balanced diet that adjusts to training volume and intensity. A yearlong nutrition plan is essential.

Prepared by SCAN/CPSDA Registered Dietitians (RDs). For a personal nutrition plan, consult an RD specializing in sports, ideally a Board-Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD). Find an RD at www.scandpg.org or www.sportsRD.org.
NCAA is a National Collegiate Athletic Association trademark.