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Optimizing growth and performance: The role of sports and pediatric nutrition in lifelong health.

Alessa Ros *

Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, University of Milan, Italy

***Correspondence to:** Alessa Ros, Department of Dietetics and Nutrition, University of Milan, Italy, E-mail: alessa@ros.it

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Introduction

Sports nutrition and pediatric nutrition represent two interconnected pillars of human health, each vital for promoting growth, development, and performance during critical stages of life. While pediatric nutrition focuses on meeting the dietary needs of children to support optimal growth and development, sports nutrition targets the unique requirements of physically active individuals to enhance performance, recovery, and overall well-being. When these disciplines intersect, particularly for young athletes, they provide a framework for establishing healthy dietary habits that can last a lifetime. Understanding the nutritional demands of children engaged in physical activities ensures not only immediate performance benefits but also long-term health outcomes [1].

Pediatric nutrition is more than just providing adequate calories—it's about ensuring a balanced intake of macronutrients and micronutrients that meet the dynamic needs of a growing body. During childhood, rapid growth in height, muscle mass, and bone density demands precise nutritional planning. Deficiencies in essential nutrients like calcium, vitamin D, iron, and protein can impact development and immune function. In parallel, the eating habits formed during these years lay the foundation for future dietary patterns, making nutrition education essential for both children and caregivers [2].

Sports nutrition takes these foundational principles and refines them for performance and recovery. For young athletes, the combination of training and growth creates unique energy and nutrient demands. Carbohydrates serve as the primary fuel source for endurance and high-intensity activities, while proteins support muscle repair and adaptation. Hydration, often overlooked, plays a crucial role in sustaining performance and preventing heat-related illnesses. Properly timed nutrient intake—before, during, and after activity—can significantly enhance a young athlete's energy levels and resilience.

Integrating sports nutrition into pediatric nutrition frameworks requires consideration of the child's age, sport type, training volume, and overall health. A one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate, as the needs of a 7-year-old beginner swimmer differ from those of a 15-year-old competitive soccer player. For younger athletes, the emphasis is often on balanced, family-oriented meals and snacks that encourage healthy eating habits, while older youth athletes may benefit from more structured meal timing and nutrient distribution strategies [3].

One critical aspect is the prevention of energy deficiency in active children. Insufficient caloric intake relative to energy expenditure can result in impaired growth, delayed puberty, weakened bones, and decreased performance. This condition, sometimes referred to as Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S), highlights the importance of regular nutritional monitoring for active youth. Education for parents, coaches, and healthcare providers is key to identifying and addressing these risks early.

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Another important consideration is the role of nutrition in injury prevention and recovery. Adequate protein intake supports tissue repair, while nutrients like omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin C, and zinc contribute to faster healing. Furthermore, maintaining a balanced diet rich in antioxidants can reduce inflammation and oxidative stress caused by intense training. Encouraging proper rest and recovery alongside nutrition is vital for sustaining young athletes' long-term engagement in sports [4].

The psychological aspect of nutrition in young athletes is equally important. Early exposure to positive dietary habits and a healthy relationship with food can prevent disordered eating patterns that sometimes emerge in competitive sports environments. Parents, coaches, and healthcare professionals should promote balanced eating without overemphasizing restrictive diets or weight goals, focusing instead on performance, health, and enjoyment of the sport.

Lastly, the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors must be considered. Access to nutrient-rich foods, safe environments for physical activity, and nutrition education resources varies across communities. Policies and programs aimed at improving childhood nutrition and promoting sports participation can have far-reaching effects, helping children from all backgrounds thrive both in athletic pursuits and in life [5].

Conclusion

The integration of sports nutrition principles into pediatric nutrition offers a powerful strategy for fostering optimal growth, performance, and lifelong health in young individuals. By understanding the distinct and combined demands of these fields, caregivers and professionals can ensure that children—whether recreationally active or competitively engaged—receive the nourishment they need. Balanced diets, adequate hydration, nutrient timing, and supportive environments form the foundation for not only physical excellence but also overall well-being, setting the stage for healthy habits that extend far beyond childhood.

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