

A Balanced Diet - the key to nourishment and preparing for your sport.

Processing the good from foods

Today's lifestyle in Ireland is counter productive to ensuring a balanced diet. Recent surveys and studies confirm this. This is partly due to the regular and excessive intake of energy rich but nutrient poor foods. By this we mean that there may be plenty of calories (energy) in a food but that its content of vitamins, minerals and trace elements may be very low. Processed foods are typical of energy rich but nutrient poor foods - the nutrients are simply processed out of the foods and we are left with mainly sugars without their natural nutrients attached. For example, an apple is rich in vitamins and minerals as well as carbohydrates but processed apple juice (made from concentrated apple juice) is low in vitamins and minerals while high in simple sugars.

Fats are good for you

The balance of fats in our diet seems to weigh in favour of saturated fats with little of the essential fatty acids ingested. Fats in our typical western diet tend to be either saturated or to some degree hydrogenated. These types of fat are not associated with good health and should be avoided. Look at Table 2 below for foods that are high in saturated fats and for foods that are good substitutes.

Table 2. Foods that are high in saturated fats and some excellent alternatives.

Some foods high in SATURATED fats:

Bacon, pork sausages, hamburgers, butter, palm oil, cream, animal fats, (lamb, beef..), whole milk products including cheese.

Some excellent alternatives:

Lean white meats such as turkey, chicken. Fish such as cod, mackerel, sardines, trout, salmon.

Fats should not to be eliminated from your diet. Remember a balanced diet includes at least 15-20% of the daily energy intake as fat. One fatty acid found abundantly in cold water fish is the Omega-3 fatty acid. Such fatty acids have been associated with beneficial health effects – notably as a protection against cardiovascular diseases. Fat is therefore crucial to good health and later we will see how it plays a vital role in building those strength and muscle related hormones in the body.

The message is clear eat plenty of fish – you will get excellent protein and you will also be assured that you will get your complement of essential fatty acids.

The food pyramid has served as a guide in illustrating what type of foods and the number of servings per day that should be consumed. Servings for a player in training (such as during the pre-season period) should be at the upper end of the recommended range of servings from the food pyramid. Thus the player in training would be expected to consume 3 meals and 1-2 additional snacks per day. This also means that the player should not have long breaks between meals or snacks.

In the current climate carbohydrates and fats are often equally maligned. It is important to appreciate that carbohydrate intake is very important for the player chiefly because carbohydrates provide the fuel for high intensity exercise and also because when carbohydrate intake is sufficient then protein is spared for its important role as a repairer and builder.

Each day ensure that you have:

- 5 servings of quality Protein from any of poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, nuts....
- 5 servings of vegetables (choose a variety of vegetables in a day)
- 4 servings of fruit (choose a variety of fruits in a day)
- 6-11 servings from cereal, bread, rice, pasta

In summary having a balance of protein, carbohydrates and protein is important for the player. Beware of restrictive diets such as those that promote just protein and fat as the main energy sources. These will not supply enough fuel to replace the used carbohydrates during training and playing.

Key Point 3

- a) Consume a wide variety of unprocessed foods during the day
- b) Ensure that you eat fish at least 4 times per week – get to like fish, it provides both protein and healthy fatty acids
- c) Ensure that you consume a balance of protein, fats and carbohydrates at each meal
- d) During the day eat at least every 3 hours if in intense training