

## Sports Nutrition Secrets for the Junior Tennis Player

The secret to sports nutrition is really no secret at all. Just as in any discipline, such as playing a musical instrument, or any sport, not just tennis, it is important to understand and practice the basics. A musician will practice their scales repeatedly, a basketball player practices their free throws their whole careers, and the serious tennis player drills the same strokes every day. They all know that without these basics becoming second nature, they cannot compete. This same principle is true in the area of sports nutrition. The athlete does not need every new, exotic, nutrition craze that seems to come along every month. Just as the athlete has to practice the basics of his sport repeatedly to excel, he has to practice the basics of sports nutrition. These basics of nutrition will keep an athlete healthy, strong and competitive for years to come.

The USDA outlines the basics of nutrition for us. They recommend we consume on a daily basis, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and protein, including three servings of fatty fish a week. Unfortunately, there is an unbelievably small percentage of the population trying to follow these USDA guidelines. There are multitudes of reasons for this, but of course, one of the most obvious is people think the four basic food groups are fast, fat, fried and frozen. This **SAD** (Standard American Diet) is especially prevalent with the junior tennis player! Typically, they will skip breakfast, or eat some sugary cereal, pastry or some other form of empty calories and carbohydrates. The result is an energy crash a couple of hours later and they drink a soda or eat a candy bar to keep going. For lunch, they eat a burger or pizza and so on. The young body can endure this for a time, but this **SAD** way of eating will catch up with them. The result of this empty diet leaves them more susceptible to fatigue, cell burnout, joints aging quicker, injury and prolonged recovery times.

The USDA recommendation for eating fruits and vegetables is of extreme importance to the junior athlete. Exposure to pollutants in the air we breathe, and the water we drink is common to everyone, increasing the potential for oxidative damage. Athletes are particularly vulnerable to oxidative damage because of their enormous output of energy, coupled with the increased consumption of air and water. Therefore, they need to consume even more anti-oxidants than the general population. The USDA recommendation is that we eat 5-9 servings of colorful fruits and vegetables a day. Some good choices of anti-oxidant rich foods are apricots, strawberries, blueberries, tomatoes and spinach, to name a few. A great way to get some anti-oxidant rich fruits in the junior player's diet is to keep around bags of frozen strawberries, mixed berries and mixed fruit. You can make fruit smoothies for them with these. All you need is a blender, milk, juice, soymilk or yogurt; add the frozen fruit and you have a delicious, nutritious treat. If they need the smoothie to be a little sweeter, just add some honey or turbinado sugar.

Another important food group the USDA recommends is whole grains. Teenagers should eat 3-7 servings of whole grains a day. A few simple changes will help you reach this goal. Switch from white rice to brown rice. My children love the short grain brown rice. Barley is another great

choice, add it to soups, it is delicious. Instead of white pasta or bread, switch to wheat pasta and whole grain breads. Roasted soybeans make a great, crunchy treat by adding your favorite seasoning to them. Eating whole grains is important because they contain something called essential oils that are vital to your health and well-being. Be careful not to count on that box of cereal or commercial loaf of whole grain bread to provide those oils. Commercial processing removes these essential oils because they do not have shelf life. Instead, concentrate on including more of the actual whole grains. The benefits for doing this are many. Recent studies show that these important oils from whole grains helped marathon runners recover more quickly. These grain oils also play a major role in preventing and treating over-use injuries. Many studies point to the fact that these oils increase endurance, stamina and slow down the aging process. All of these are important factors for the tennis player.

A further recommendation by the USDA's top scientists is that we eat three servings of fatty fish a week because of their importance in reducing inflammation, increasing cardiovascular health and balancing mental health and well-being. The importance of Omega 3's from cold-water fish become more and more established all the time. In fact, the National Academy of Sciences is considering establishing a recommended dietary allowance for Omega 3's. For the athlete, it is also important to note that Omega 3's can improve aerobic performance, and for those with exercise-induced asthma, Omega 3's have given almost an 80% improvement in a lung function test taken 15 minutes after exercise. One of the number one complaints among serious tennis players is joint pain and inflammation. Once again, science points us to Omega 3's role in controlling the inflammatory response. To help meet this USDA recommendation, one of the best dietary sources is North Atlantic salmon. Farm raised salmon is not as high in EPA and DHA, and can be full of contaminants. When purchasing salmon, be sure to ask for cold water, North Atlantic salmon.

Lastly, let us look at the importance of protein in the development of the junior player. Proteins consist of amino acids. They are the body's building blocks. They are the fundamental source for repairing and renewing cells. The junior player needs to be replenishing these at a rate far greater than the non-active teenager is, simply because they are still growing and are using up these building blocks at an accelerated rate by the sheer volume of their activity. It is important to be sure they are consuming a good lean form of protein every time they eat. Not only will this help ensure they will have an adequate supply of amino acids to build, repair and recover, but this will also help them keep balanced blood sugar levels and have energy levels that are more consistent. Turkey sandwiches on whole wheat bread, yogurt, nuts, grilled chicken, boiled eggs, lean meats and cottage cheese are all good choices.

The truth about the science behind real sports nutrition is this: avoid exotic stories about exotic products and do not be deceived into thinking there is a short cut to good sports nutrition. It really is as simple as practicing on a daily basis the basics.

In closing, try to limit the amount of refined sugar and fried foods the junior player consumes. In addition, Grandma was right when she said breakfast was the most important meal of the day. You have to take control and make sure your junior player eats breakfast and includes a good

protein source as part of that breakfast. The government recently published a 100-page study on the importance of a balanced breakfast for children. Finally yet importantly, if you see you are falling short in meeting these guidelines, please supplement the gaps. Failure to be sure you are meeting these USDA guidelines on a daily basis can be very costly. It costs a lot of money for coaching, going to tournaments and purchasing equipment, all to help the junior tennis player reach their goals and dreams. For the junior player's best, it makes sense to protect that investment by caring about real sports nutrition.

Wishing you Healthy Tennis for a lifetime!

Laurie Wexel

[http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic\\_text/food/grain/train.htm](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/food/grain/train.htm),

<http://www.5aday.org/>

<http://www.ific.org/foodinsight/2001/ma/omega3fi201.cfm>

<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3013797>

<http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/OtherProjects/SymposiumBreakfastAndLearning.pdf>