

3 common myths about lacrosse players and nutrition

Complex carbohydrates are essential and sports drinks are OK but you can leave vitamins and mineral supplements on the shelf

By Jacqueline R. Berning, Special to The Baltimore Sun

April 19, 2012

As a sport dietitian, I find it very interesting to be on the sideline listening to what parents and players have to say about feeding and hydrating lacrosse players. Where do they get this information? Do they really believe that three Red Bulls before a game will improve performance?

Here are the three common sports nutrition myths heard on the sidelines:

MYTH: Players do not need to eat carbohydrates because lacrosse is a sprinting sport, not an endurance event.

FACT: The game of lacrosse involves lots of sprinting and jogging, and very little walking. A game has between 50 and 60 minutes of play at the higher levels, and researchers have found that players may run anywhere between three and five miles per game depending on the position. Carbohydrates are the most important fuel for this type of exercise, particularly for high-intensity sports. If players do not eat enough carbohydrates, they run out of fuel and cannot keep up with the intensity of the game, especially in the second half.

Players need to eat carbohydrates; however, they should focus on whole-grain breads, cereals, fruits and vegetables, not sugary snacks. Recommendations say that at least half of what a lacrosse player eats should be complex carbohydrates. For an early-morning game, whole-grain cereal such as oatmeal, whole-grain breads or toast, with a small amount of protein like yogurt or a scrambled egg, are good choices — not the doughnuts that many well-meaning parents bring to the game.

For an afternoon game, a sub sandwich (no chips or soda) with a piece of fruit or some carrots and a sports drink are perfect. Not a high-fat, high-calorie fast food meal. In addition, carbohydrates need to be eaten throughout the day, not just before the game. High-carbohydrate meals the night before the game, as well as for the pregame meal, are important for loading the muscles with fuel for performance.

MYTH: Lacrosse players should drink water instead of sports drinks.

FACT: Water is good, but sports drinks may be better. Research has demonstrated that the carbohydrates in sports drinks can fuel the muscles (especially in the latter half of a game), and the electrolytes can encourage the players to drink more, thus preventing dehydration.

Water can hydrate, but it does not contain energy or electrolytes, thus turning off the drive to drink. Most parents do not know that a sports drink such as Gatorade contains a 6 percent carbohydrate solution. That means a sports drink contains about half the amount of sugar of soda, fruit juice, boxed juices or energy drinks.

Beverages with a high concentration of carbohydrates (greater than 8 percent) will delay the absorption of fluid and may promote dehydration. Youth players who may use a carbohydrate gel at halftime for a quick energy source might be better off using a sports drink; most youth players do not drink enough fluid at halftime to dilute the gel to a concentration at which the body can absorb it.

Water is essential and needs to be consumed throughout the day, and players should take sips of water every time they pass a drinking fountain in school. Before, during and after a game, sports drinks have been found to be more beneficial because of the carbohydrates and electrolytes. In tournament play, a sports drink will help players rehydrate and refuel between games. Research has also found that when a beverage has flavor, players are more likely to drink it and drink more of it, preventing dehydration.

MYTH: Taking a vitamin or mineral supplement will fuel a lacrosse player.

FACT: Vitamins and minerals do not have calories and therefore cannot directly provide energy. The role of vitamins and minerals is to break down the foods we eat for energy. The fuel for lacrosse is primarily carbohydrates. One of the benefits of eating carbohydrates like whole grains and fruits and vegetables is that they provide energy as well as vitamins and minerals.

Is there a time when supplements would be appropriate? Maybe. Most health professionals, including registered dietitians, find that supplements might be beneficial for players who have a disease or disorder that would affect absorption or metabolism of certain nutrients. Too often I hear players' parents say they make their children take a supplement because 1) They are picky eaters. Data shows that picky eaters who take a multivitamin and mineral supplement just get higher levels of the same nutrients. 2) It is good insurance to have them take a supplement just in case. Actually, the better insurance is food. Children and adolescents who eat a variety of foods during family meals get the nutrients they need and are much better eaters as adults.

Before encouraging players to follow the next sports nutrition myth, know that sports nutrition is grounded in science. In order for something to work in the body, it must have a physiological base and some metabolic pathway. Learn more at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics' Sports, Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutrition website (scandpg.org).

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