

## Parent's Club Nutrition Lecture:

In the 1980's gymnastics had earned a bad reputation for, essentially abusing athletes nutritionally. Coaches, who felt pressure from judges, emphasized physical appearance, (some went so far as to put gymnasts on a scale daily) and "diets" to their athletes; thereby, cultivating eating disorders among several high level gymnasts of note – and many others who weren't as public. The widespread reporting on these tragic tales created a coaching environment in which any subject that dealt with food, or eating at all was taboo.

There has been a powerful resurgence in "food talk" over the last 8 – 10 years, but now, the talk is about *healthy nutrition*.

Giving your daughter every possible competitive advantage is important. You spend \$100 + dollars on a competitive leo that she will likely wear 5 – 7 times, because that leotard accentuates your daughter's gymnastics beauty. You spend nearly \$300 and 22+ hours a month in this gym because you feel *this place* can give your daughter what she needs to succeed. You spend \$50 a pair for grips, thousands of dollars on parent's club activities all to give her the advantages she needs, and now, it is time to spend some time thinking about, and giving her the proper fuel, both for practice, and competition. However, it goes beyond just "fueling" her for workouts. There are a significant amount of studies that suggest her "wellness" can be directly correlated to her eating habits.

First, let's talk about her basic fueling needs:

*NEVER skip breakfast. It truly is the most important meal of the day... For those of us that skip breakfast, our bodies go into a starvation or survival mode. We conserve our energy as if we were not going to be fed again. Therefore, our metabolic rate or our caloric need will actually decrease. What happens after that is we need to eat fewer calories in a 24 hour period than we did before to maintain our weight... If we skip breakfast, we become fatigued late in the morning and are unable to concentrate very well. (Lapiana)*

Other than the obvious benefits of being well charged for school, there are emotional, and psychological benefits to her gymnastics by your daughter starting off her day "ready to go" at school. The stress of having underachieved on a 3<sup>rd</sup> period test carries over to workout, and decreases performance. Never mind the physiological affects of skipping breakfast, and the harm it does to "recovering muscles".

Lapiana goes on to suggest that no more than 4 hours should elapse between significant caloric consumption. She offers this suggestion to gymnasts, in particular because of their "odd hours":

*If you have lunch at 1:00 p.m. then at 5:00 p.m. it is time to eat again. But you will be at the gym and do not have time to eat between classes. You will not be home until 9:00 p.m. What should you do? At 5:00 p.m., take time to eat a more substantial snack like a sandwich and a beverage. Typically, 100 calories per hour is a quick and dirty way to*

*determine the quantity of the snack to have to hold you over until the next meal... (Lapiana)*

She goes further to suggest some healthy snacks to pack for your kids such as: “cut carrots, celery & peanut butter, frozen grapes & pretzels”. Another concern I know that parents face is whether or not to feed your gymnast a full meal after practice, since they typically don’t arrive home until after 9:00.

*After a long day at the gym, it is important to listen to your body and eat if you are hungry even if it’s late at night. This is the time however to make sure your choices are healthy and your portions are reasonable. If you are hungry, most likely your body needs calories and the nutrients from the food. It is important to not over eat because we may store those calories as fat and this is one thing we are all trying to avoid. Calorie control takes place over a 24 hour period. Look at the entire day and make a smart choice late at night. (Lapiana)*

Beyond Lapiana’s suggestions, Farrell urges (in her article on “Nutrition for Performance”) that:

*It is best to eat dinner within 30 minutes of finishing practice. This is the meal in which it is important to eat foods that are high on the glycemic index [see attached examples of the glycemic index] list, such as bagels, carrots, as well as foods with protein, like chicken or fish. (Farrell)*

GI (glycemic index) is a table that is used most often to determine what foods most drastically affect the rise and fall of blood sugar. Farrell implies that eating foods high on the glycemic index during practices is going to cause the athlete to “crash” (in terms of her energy levels and maybe even on her dismount 😊). \*It is, however, important to note, that the method used to process foods will affect their GI. In general, the more preservatives used, the higher a food will end up on the GI. This, is why the American Diabetes Association, urges caution, when relying on the GI.

So as not to get carried away with “eliminating carbs” and bolstering proteins, Nancy Clark provides us with some useful information regarding healthy choices for gymnasts in particular. She was asked the following, and then responded accordingly:

*I've cut back on carbohydrates to avoid "sugar highs and sugar lows." I'm eating protein with each meal but I am afraid to have potato, rice, and bread. I've heard these foods have a high glycemic index and quickly elevate my blood sugars, only to create an excessive amount of insulin that takes too much sugar out of my blood and makes me "crash." What's the right balance of protein to carbohydrates to keep my blood sugar stable?*

*...the vast majority simply underconsume calories at breakfast and lunch. They get light-headed in the afternoon not because of a reaction to carbohydrates, but because they failed to put enough fuel in their bodies and are running on fumes. The solution is not to limit carbs but rather to eat heartier breakfasts and lunches. These meals should include both carbs (for energy) and protein (for satiety)-such as milk with cereal, turkey on bread, and meat sauce with pasta.... (Clark)*

*I've started eating a protein bar and protein shake at breakfast and lunch (instead of cereal and sandwiches). My mom worries I'm eating too much protein. What's the right balance?*

*A: To build muscle, you need adequate protein, extra carbohydrates, and, of course, resistance exercise such as lifting weights. Carbs fuel your muscles and give you the energy needed to perform the muscle-building exercise. If you eat too much protein by displacing, let's say, cereal with a protein bar, you'll not only fail to fuel your muscles properly, but will also fail to invest in optimal health. Displacing natural foods with engineered foods (protein supplements) limits your intake of the health-protective nutrients nature puts in whole foods. (Clark)*

She elaborates on the competitive athletes “grams of protein to lbs of healthy body weight ratio” for your standard competitive athlete, as well as a growing teenage female athlete, and they are as follows:

Competitive Gymnasts should have a 0.6 – 0.9 grams of protein to lbs. of healthy body weight ratio.

Competitive Teenage Gymnast should have a 0.8 - 0.9 ratio.

In the above examples, your 10 year old, 75 lbs. gymnast should take in approximately 53 grams of protein a day. While your 90 lbs. 13 year old gymnast should take in approximately 77 grams of protein per day. In her article, as well as several other articles I researched, protein supplements are NOT the answer. In fact, multiple Doctors, and nutritionists, felt that protein supplements often HINDER the performance of athletes because they prevent the ingestion of other vital nutrients. By “filling the athlete’s belly” strictly with the protein shake, or bar, they simply have no room for the other vitals.

From all of this we can glean several key ideas:

1<sup>st</sup>, feed your athletes, don’t starve them. The 1980’s have been over for nearly 20 years, and we should all be able to move beyond the old “skin fat tests” to determine a gymnast’s viability. However, the better shape your body is in, the easier time you will have convincing it to do what you want.

2<sup>nd</sup>, eating frequently is a good thing. Send your children to practice with healthy snacks – not \$2.00 for a pack of starburst and a mountain dew.

3<sup>rd</sup>, some of our old, steadfast rules ring true even through all of the latest fads, and crazes. Try to feed your kids plenty of protein to help with muscle recovery. Try to minimize their consumption of “simple carbohydrates” immediately before and during times in which much will be asked of their bodies. During those same periods, don’t be afraid of complex carbohydrates. Load up on the calcium rich NATURAL products like milk to support a healthy bone structure. And keep your kids hydrated during practice. Fruits and vegetables are much healthier snack alternatives, but we still understand that they are kids, and the occasional cookie isn’t going to keep them off the floor at Nationals. However, giving them a big piece of chocolate cake for their “snack” during snack break, might put their face on the floor during their last floor routine on Saturday.