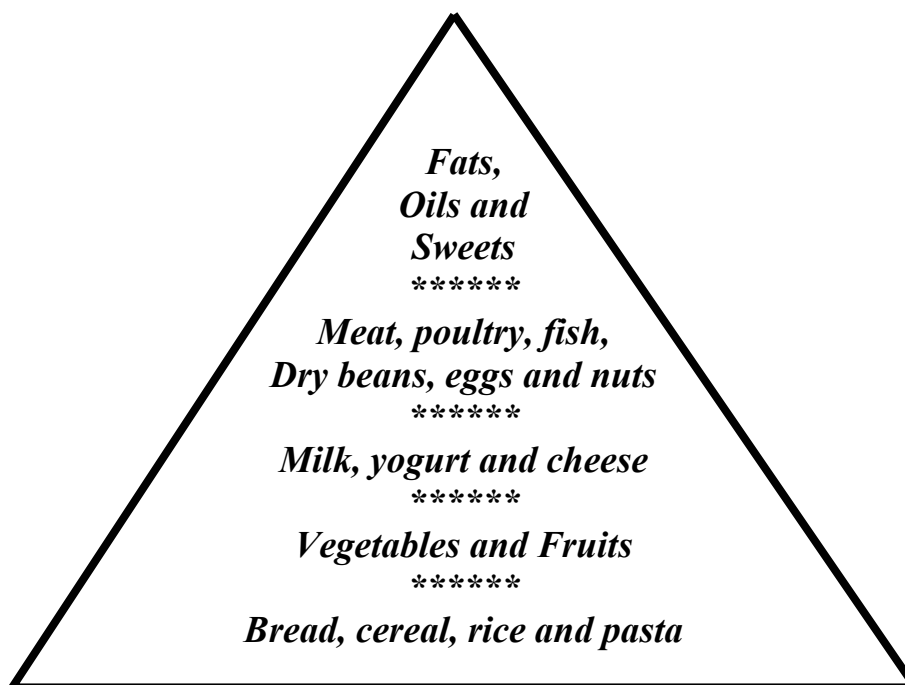


Dribbling for the basketball player, agility for the hockey player, sprinting for the long jumper--these are fundamental skills. One fundamental skill of nutrition is giving your body the nutrients it needs. Without strong fundamental skills in your sport, every part of performance suffers. It's the same with nutrition. Without the fundamentals, your nutrition game plan is built on shaky ground.

What's the Best Way for an Athlete to Eat?

There is no one right way to eat. The best diet for you is one that meets your unique needs. And your needs depend on your age, gender, body size, training, sport and food likes and dislikes. There is one rule, though. Your best diet gives your body what it needs: the 50-plus nutrients along with the oodles of other helpful substances in foods.

Athlete or not, the Food Guide Pyramid shows one example of how much and what kind of foods to choose to get the nutrients you need. You'll see the Pyramid printed on bread wrappers, cereal boxes and the like. The Pyramid divides foods into five groups:



Each food group provides specific nutrients. Eating foods from all food groups each day covers your bases. Breads, cereals, rice and pasta provide carbohydrate to the diet. So do fruits and vegetables. Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts are major contributors of protein, iron and zinc. Dairy products give us protein, carbohydrate and calcium.

Not only is it important to eat foods from all food groups, it's important to eat a variety of foods within each food group to make sure you get all the needed nutrients. In other words, eating three servings of potatoes won't give you as many vitamins and minerals as eating one serving each of carrots, broccoli and potatoes.

The tip of the pyramid is labeled fats, oils and sweets and states "use sparingly." The recommendation to use fats, oils and sweets sparingly is based on concerns about excess calorie intake in non-active Americans. The more active you are, the more calories you burn, and the more calories you burn, the more you can eat from the tip.

How Many Servings

How many servings you eat from each food group will depend on how many calories you need. The table shows the minimum recommended servings in the first column. As a general rule of thumb, your diet is adequate in vitamins and minerals if you eat at least the minimum number of servings from each food group. But to get enough calories, protein and carbohydrate, most athletes need more than that. Here are examples of servings at various calorie levels.

	Minimum Servings 1,600 calories	2,800 calories	3,600 calories	5,000 calories*
Bread, cereal, rice and pasta	6	11	14	18
Vegetable	3	5	7	10
Fruit	2	4	5	7
Milk, yogurt, cheese	2	3	4	6
Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dry beans, and nuts	5 oz	7 oz	9 oz	14 oz
Added fats and oils	25 g (5 tsp)	32 g (6 ½ tsp)	42 g (8 ½ tsp)	49 g (10 tsp)
Added sugar	11 tsp	18 tsp	24 tsp	28 tsp

*This chart represents a high carbohydrate, low fat diet. As you can see, the servings become unreasonable at 5000 calories. It's hard for even the biggest eating machine to down 17 servings of vegetables and fruits in a day! Usually athletes who require higher calorie diets eat more fats, oils and sugars to get the extra calories.

What's a Serving?

A serving is not necessarily a helping. A helping is the amount you eat. A helping is much bigger than a serving in many cases. Here are the defined servings of each of the food groups:

Bread:	1 slice bread, 1 small muffin, or dinner roll.
Cereal:	1 ounce ready-to-eat cereal or ½ cup cooked cereal
Pasta and rice:	½ cup cooked
Raw leafy vegetables (lettuce):	1 cup
Other vegetables:	½ cup
Fruit:	1 medium apple, banana or orange or ½ cup
Juices:	¾ cup
Milk:	1 cup
Yogurt:	1 cup
Cheese:	1 1/2 to 2 ounces
Meat:	2-3 ounces cooked
Equivalent to 1 ounce of meat:	1 egg, ½ cup dried beans, cooked; 2 tbsp. peanut butter

Fluids

Another important part of the athlete's diet, perhaps the most important, is not highlighted in the Food Guide Pyramid. That is fluid. You need enough fluids to replace the amount you sweat off each day. Eight glasses may be enough for non-athletes, but you'll need much more than that to stay hydrated.

That's it?

Like the fundamental skills for your sport, the fundamentals of nutrition are not new and perhaps not very interesting, but can be hard to master. Once you have mastered the fundamentals of nutrition, you are ready to move on to things you may find more interesting, like precompetition eating, changing body composition and improving endurance. These things are important, but by focusing on the fundamentals first, you build a solid nutrition foundation.