

Special needs of the young player

Football enjoys one of the highest participation rates for children and adolescents around the world, offering the benefits of aerobic fitness, skill development and a team environment without the risks of a contact sport. Girls and boys can start playing at an early age, often with modifications to rules, playing time and pitch sizes. Soccer continues as a popular sport from primary school through to university levels. Those with particular talent may be chosen for scholarships to junior development programs for football. Others continue to play football for recreation, fitness or social contact.

Training issues

Depending on the age and calibre of the young player, “training” may range from the weekly match to structured squad sessions. The goals of training may range from simply having fun through to a progressive program aimed at developing the skills and specific fitness and physique required to play soccer at high levels. Talented young players may be invited to train with another age group or with a senior squad, often in addition to their involvement with their primary team.

Competition issues

At junior levels, players may follow modified rules, which alter the duration of their play and the activity patterns of the game. Young players typically play in a weekly competition, over a short competition season. However, players who are being developed towards a potential career in elite or professional teams may play in a number of teams or competitions. This can lead to heavy physical demands on these young players, and parents, teachers and coaches should be aware of the risks of playing too many games.

Special issues and eating strategies:

Parents are often roped in to become the coaches and trainers of under-age teams. They may accept these positions without an appreciation of the nutritional needs of

Strategies for high energy eating

It is usually more efficient to increase the number of times that food is eaten each day – for example, a series of 5-9 meals and snacks – than trying simply to increase the size of meals.

Drinks such as fruit smoothies, liquid meal supplements and fortified milkshakes and juices can provide a substantial source of energy and nutrients that are quick and compact to consume, and less likely to cause gastrointestinal discomfort than bulky foods.

Sugary foods and specialised sports products (drinks, bars) can provide a compact form of carbohydrate and other nutrients, which is particularly useful when energy needs are high.

A food record can identify the times in a busy day that aren't being well used for fuelling up. The player should use creative ideas and good planning to arrange a supply of portable snacks and drinks that can travel with them over their day.

Adaptation to a resistance training program may be enhanced by consuming “recovery” snacks providing protein and carbohydrate before and after each workout.

football or young people, and without any resources to implement a team program. It is important that education resources are made available to these coaches so that they can guide young players into good habits.

Players should be encouraged to develop good nutritional habits at an early age. Adolescence is a time marked by an increased independence in food choice and food preparation. The promise of sporting success may provide strong motivation to develop good dietary practices. Information and the example of good role models may help a young person to develop sound eating practices in everyday (training) diets as well as the specific preparation for matches.

The physiology of children and adolescents differs from that of adults in several ways. The mechanisms of thermoregulation are less efficient in children, and special attention must be paid to the environment, activity patterns, clothing and hydration to avoid problems of hyperthermia or hypothermia.

The growth spurts during childhood and adolescents require nutritional support in terms of adequate intake of energy, protein and minerals. Active young people may find it difficult to meet their needs for energy and nutrients when the costs of training and growth are added. Young people may not have developed the nutritional knowledge and time management skills to fit in all the eating occasions required to achieve high energy, nutrient-rich eating.

The rate of obesity in children is still rising, but active youngsters do need to eat lots of food.

Many young players are eager to increase the rate of their growth and muscular development in pursuit of the physique of an adult player. While growth and maturation are genetically determined, high-energy eating plans can assist the athlete to maximise the outcomes of growth and specialised training programs.

Young players eating a wide range of foods should not need to use dietary supplements, and players should be aware that these do not provide a short cut to success.

Food combinations supplying carbohydrate and proteingy eating

- Breakfast cereal and milk
- Sandwiches with meats, cheese or egg fillings
- Meat/fish/chicken stir-fries served with rice or noodles
- Fruit smoothies or liquid meal supplements
- Fruit and yoghurt
- Dried fruit and nut mixes

