Nutritional Needs of the Recreational Athlete

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Whether an individual is a recreational athlete, a physically active person, or a competitive athlete, proper daily nutrition will enhance overall health, improve exercise performance, prevent injuries due to fatigue, provide energy during high-intensity training, and facilitate maintenance of an optimal body weight. Knowledge of the contributions of nutrition and exercise to optimal health is vital for the recreational athlete.

Defining the Recreational Athlete

The definition of a recreational athlete should be considered. For example, would the following individual be classified as a recreational athlete, a physically active person, or a competitive athlete?

At six a.m., the person walks a dog for 20 minutes, uses the stairs instead of the elevator at work, lifts weights for forty minutes in the afternoon, and plays in a volleyball game at a local gym in the evening.

This person could be classified as physically active on the basis of dog walking, stair climbing, and weight lifting, but could also be classified as a recreational athlete or competitive athlete on the basis of participation in competitive volleyball.

A recreational athlete can be defined as a person who is physically active but who does not train for competition at the same level of intensity and focus as a competitive athlete. He or she participates in sports to be physically fit, socially involved, and mostly to have fun. Some recreational athletes are former athletes who still enjoy competition within his or her age group (e.g., Masters Events). Another recreational athlete may play in a league, (e.g., bowling) for two to three months and his or her physical activity is performed only one night a week during that period. Yet, playing backyard badminton is considered a recreational activity. Physical activity is any body movement produced by muscles that results in energy expenditure; thus, the term physically active refers to an individual who participates in a planned repetitive movements that are structured to improve and maintain physical fitness (i.e., the ability of the body to adapt to the demands and stresses of physical effort). A competitive athlete is an individual who participates in “competitive physical activities” or sports/games that require physical strength, agility, or stamina.

Regardless of the classification of the individual in the example, nutritional needs are specific for the individual’s level of activity intensity. Some researchers suggest that a recreational athlete does not require sport-specific nutritional advice, but simply needs to be provided with general nutrition guidelines. They assume that a recreational athlete does not compete or train at a level of intensity comparable to that of a collegiate athlete or a professional athlete. Actually, recreational athletes train at various intensity levels for a variety of reasons. Consequently, they need adequate energy intake, a fluid intake that is adequate to maintain hydration and electrolyte balance, and a variety of food choices that will provide a balance of nutrients in order to perform at an optimal level. Sports nutritional guidelines for the competitive athlete will also benefit the recreational athlete. For example, competitive athletes are advised to consume carbohydrates as the main source of energy from foods such as whole grain products, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and low-fat dairy products. This recommendation is also applicable for the noncompetitive individual. Although weightlifters and endurance athletes require greater amounts of protein than other athletes, most athletes consume a similar percentage of protein in the diet as the general population.
population. Athletes and nonathletes generally follow similar dietary guidelines for consumption of vitamins, minerals, water, and electrolytes.

Assessing a Diet Plan

Recreational athletes must first determine if they are ingesting a healthy diet to maintain optimal health. Are they following the basic 2005 Dietary Guidelines? The 2005 guidelines sum up the current recommendations for healthy individuals over the age of two regarding nutrition and lifestyle (including physical activity) for good health. These guidelines are the means toward helping people reduce the risk of many diseases, of which a correlation between diet and lifestyle choices has been established. So many individuals who do not eat a healthy, balanced diet on a daily basis begin developing symptoms such as fatigue, inability to focus, and lack of energy. Instead of evaluating their current nutritional plan for deficiencies, they seek out the latest supplement that they think will appease these symptoms. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines could help the recreational athlete avoid symptoms of an unhealthy diet.

The following is a partial list of the nine categories that compile the 2005 Dietary Guidelines:

1. Consume a variety of nutrient-dense foods and beverages within and among the basic food groups, but be careful not to exceed the amount of daily calories you need to maintain a healthy weight.
2. Maintain a balance between the amount of calories consumed daily and the amount you need to maintain a healthy weight.
3. Try to be physically active every day.
4. Eat a variety of foods from the food groups listed in MyPyramid.

For a complete listing of the dietary guidelines and a comparison of the nutritional needs of a recreational athlete to that of an inactive individual, visit www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines. You have adjusted your dietary plan to include the 2005 Dietary Guidelines but you want to know if you are consuming enough calories for your activity. Are you eating too many servings of grains or a small amount of vegetables? Unfortunately, a “one size fits all” diet cannot be suggested for all recreational athletes. Every recreational athlete works out at different workload intensity with specific goals in mind for that workout. During the activity, the individual is increasing their energy expenditure or “burning calories.” Thus, how many calories from food must be consumed to perform your recreational activity in addition to your daily activities? The level of intensity must be determined and is classified using the terms sedentary, moderately active, and active. How is your level of activity classified? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) has examples of general physical activities as defined by level of intensity:

1. Sedentary — partaking in less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity in addition to daily activities.
2. Moderately Active — Partaking in at least 30 minutes and up to 60 minutes a day of moderate physical activity in addition to daily activities.
3. Active — partaking in 60 or more minutes a day of moderate physical activity in addition to daily activities.

Once you determine your level of intensity, you can go to MyPyramid at www.MyPyramid.gov and determine the number of calories/day you require which is based on your age, gender, and level of intensity. MyPyramid (formerly the food guide pyramid) reflects the principles outlined in the Dietary Guidelines and is a food guidance system that can be used to teach consumers about basic nutrition. Although very helpful, MyPyramid has two drawbacks: Serving sizes are small and do not always coincide with the standard amounts of food we buy, prepare and serve. It is difficult to distinguish between higher fat and lower fat food choices within certain food groups. Let us look at Alana (a 28-year-old female) who swims one hour daily to prepare for a Master’s swim meet. She sits at a computer from 9 a.m.–5 p.m. and looks forward to her daily workout. Based on this information, she is considered active and she should consume 2,400 calories/day. MyPyramid will also guide her regarding the number of servings she needs from the whole grains, vegetables, fruits, oils, milk products, and meat and beans food groups. Based on the required 2,400 calories she needs, she should incorporate the servings from each of the food groups in MyPyramid into her daily routine (Table 1). To learn more about serving sizes and portion control, visit the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute’s Portion Distortion Quiz at http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion/index.htm.