

Nutrition for Female Athletes



Nutrition focuses for female health & performance



Female athletes have a different physiology and unique nutritional requirements compared to male athletes. They're at a greater risk of certain deficiencies and have increased considerations related to the menstrual cycle. To maximise performance and ensure good health, female athletes need to be fuelling well and with the right kinds of foods. Keep reading to find out what female athletes should be focusing on in their nutrition.

Energy

Simply eating enough calories from food is the first and often most important area to consider for female athletes. Because female youth athletes have very high energy needs, they will need to eat a lot of foods to match this. Calories are often associated with negative thoughts, but they're nothing to be feared. Consuming enough calories is absolutely crucial to good sports performance and most importantly health. Some of the risks of not consuming enough energy are shown below.

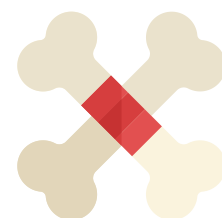
Under fuelling leads to:



Increased risk of injury & illness



Menstrual cycle changes



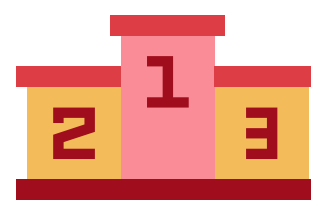
Poor bone health



Impaired cognitive function



Poor mood

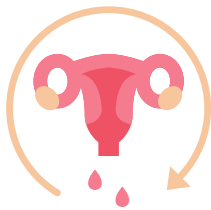


Bad performance

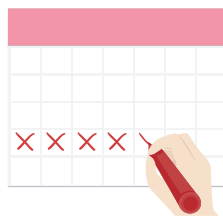
Menstrual Cycle

One of the biggest risks of under fuelling is changes to the menstrual cycle. If athletes do not consume enough calories, the body will shut down some processes to conserve energy. One of these will be the menstrual cycle. This causes changes in hormone production which will have a knock-on effect on bone health and increase an athlete's risk to fractures, breaks and osteoporosis. Track your cycle and if you notice any changes to your periods or if they stop, you must see a doctor.

Watch out for:



Changes to your cycle



Missing periods



Not having a period

Macronutrients

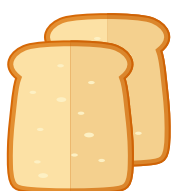
The three macronutrients; carbohydrates, protein and fat are all essential to female athletes' diets and shouldn't be restricted.

Carbs are the main source of energy during exercise, but intake is often lower in female athletes which will impact performance. Include carbohydrates in each meal and eat a high carb meal before and after training.

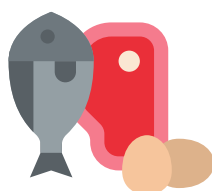
Protein is essential for muscle growth and repair. Many female athletes worry that eating protein will make them muscular but protein alone won't cause this. Have a portion of protein in each meal and 1-2 high protein snacks throughout the day.

Fats are often avoided because of the idea they make people fat, but they're essential to maintaining good health and for energy too. Include plenty of unsaturated fats.

Include:



Carbs
for energy



Protein
for muscle repair

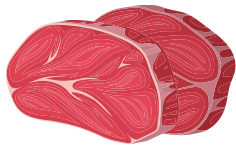


Fats
for health

Iron

Female athlete's lose iron from blood loss during their period and from sweating during exercise. This puts them at a much greater risk of iron deficiency and anaemia than male athletes or other females of the same age, especially so for those who are vegetarian or vegan. Iron plays a vital role in energy production and transports oxygen around the body. Low iron levels will therefore affect performance and can increase feelings of fatigue, weakness and increased heart rate. Eat plenty of iron rich foods to prevent deficiency and see a doctor for blood tests if you're worried.

Sources of iron:



Red meat



Green leafy veg



Legumes



Fortified cereals

Period Pain

There are lots of different symptoms of the menstrual cycle that can affect sports performance including changes to mood, period pains and cramps and heavy bleeding. The impact of the menstrual cycle on sports performance is becoming more and more researched and most athletes feel that period pain is one of the biggest factors to how well they can perform. Good nutrition can play a role in reducing some of these symptoms and keeping training levels high. Increase intake of anti-inflammatory foods such as oily fish, fruit and veg, nuts and seeds or a fish oil supplement at the beginning of your period to help to reduce pains and cramps and to allow for more normal levels of training. Listen to your body and match your training levels to how you're feeling.

Anti-inflammatory foods:



Oily fish



Fruit & veg



Nuts & seeds



Fish oil supplement