

Good Nutrition for Dancers Part 2

Our last newsletter featured “Part 1 of Good Nutrition for Dancers” where I reviewed the value of water, minerals, and vitamins – all good advice from Kristin Wood, the registered dietician from Kaiser Permanente who came to WSPA to talk with our performers about healthy eating. In this month’s issue I’d like to summarize her information she shared with the kids and parents on fiber, protein, balanced meals, and caffeine intake.

Fiber

Fiber is very important in the daily meals of athletes. Fiber refers to carbohydrates that cannot be digested; it is the bulk or roughage in fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains that helps move food through the digestive system, promoting healthy bowel function and protecting against constipation. For young dancers, the right amount of daily fiber, about 26 grams daily, suppresses hunger by creating a “fuller” feeling, which discourages over-eating, and it helps keep energy up on those long rehearsal days. Kristin highly recommends the following fiber-rich meals: breakfast: whole grain oatmeal with fresh fruit and nuts; lunch: a sandwich with whole grain bread or a veggie filled salad with beans or grains; dinner: a variety of vegetables with the skins intact, chili, artichoke hearts, avocado, and spinach are all great sources of fiber. Parents and dancers should look for nutritional labels that show at least 3 to 5 grams of fiber per serving. With 3 meals and 3 snacks a day, that adds up to the recommended daily fiber intake.

Protein

Protein is an important sustaining nutrient that a dancer’s body needs – it builds bones and tissue, produces hormones and enzymes in energy metabolism, and maintains healthy muscles and helps repair the body after dance classes and rehearsals. It is helpful for performers with long days to consume protein at multiple times throughout the day to help regulate blood sugar levels, prevent potential fatigue and overindulging. Some examples of foods that are rich in protein include: lean meats, eggs, peanut or other nut butters, milk, yogurt, cheese, nuts, legumes and beans, and tofu or other soy products. Don’t forget protein powders, like Spirulina. Kristin reminded us to be careful about soy; too much soy can have negative side effects and change the bacteria in our intestines. Young dancers who are expending a lot of energy need about 60-70 grams of protein a day.

Balanced Meals

Lastly, dancers expend more energy than the average person, so when they're hungry, they need to eat and have a healthy option prepared and ready – preparation is the key. Sticking to a regimen of 3 balanced meals and 3 healthy snacks a day will fuel their rigorous physical activities. Every meal or snack should include one or more of the following: carbohydrates, protein, and essential fatty acids. Her final pearls of wisdom included:

1. Drink caffeine sparingly and not daily. One 6-8 oz. cup can provide a “reboot”, but too much can stress adrenal glands. Black teas are better for caffeine but in the same small amounts. Avoid any caffeinated energy drinks, such as Red Bull and Monster. Always avoid sodas.

2. Try Probiotic drinks with fruit, which can help protect your body from harmful bacteria and encourage healthy bacteria in your gut and boost your immune system.

3. Be careful of mindlessly ordering Jamba Juice drinks which are made with sherbet = a ton of sugar and no fiber.

4. Some of Kristin's favorite meals and snacks include: carrots and hummus, apples and peanut butter, tuna salad and rye whole grain crackers, crab and corn salad, curried chicken with cranberries and apples, jicama and kale dip, spiced-up popcorn, and string cheese and nuts.

5. Get that engine running. Eat promptly upon awakening in the morning.

6. Keep that engine running smoothly. Meals and snacks should be alternated every 2-3 hours to avoid blood sugar drops and spikes. Skipping meals is simply inadequate nutrition and can negatively and counterproductively lower your metabolism.

7. Unfortunately some of the most popular breakfast cereals contain between 41 and 56% sugar, like Fruit Loops, Captain Crunch, and Apple Jacks. Check the nutrition panel for the recommended less than 8 grams of sugar per serving and at least 3 grams or more of fiber.

Feel free to contact her for more information and individualized meal plans for your young dancer: Kristin Wood RD kwoodlove@gmail.com