

Pre-game Meal – Fuel up your body the right way!

Hockey may arguably be the most demanding sport on your body. Skating under 20 pounds of equipment while using every muscle to move in a high speed and physical atmosphere will deplete all energy reserves in one hour's time. When all energy reserves are used, muscles fatigue, body awareness slows, and decision making is impaired. This process leads to injury.

That is why proper pre-game meals are essential for you to participate at a high level of play. There are three essential keys to follow while preparing for a game: 1) Types of foods, 2) Timing of meals, 3) Hydration.

Types of Foods. The body's main source of energy comes from carbohydrates (carbs). Carbs are easily digestible because they require little water to break down. Glycogen is a carbohydrate end-product and is categorized as simple or complex. Simple carbs burn very quickly and are best used during or after a competition. Complex carbs burn slowly and provide long lasting energy.

Complex carbs, the right fuels, come from fruits, vegetables, pastas (with tomato sauces only), oatmeal, and whole grain breads. These foods provide more 'sustained' energy and can therefore be eaten hours before a game. Simple carbs come in the form of refined sugars (candy, soda pop, and most bottled 'fruit' drinks containing high fructose corn syrup). These foods will spike your energy and cause you to 'bonk' within a matter of minutes.

Proteins such as meats and dairy products can be eaten but should be in small quantities. Meats should be light such as chicken or fish avoiding red meat or meats high in fat. Dairy products low in sugar (cottage cheese, eggs, milk) can be included. Be careful with yogurt as many are high in simple sugars.

Heavy sauces such as Alfredo sauce, butters, cooking oils should not be included in the meal. Foods high in fat should also be avoided as they take too long to digest and provide no short term energy benefits.

Timing of Meals. Depending if the game is in the morning or night, weekday or weekend, all food needs time to digest. In general, a meal should be eaten no later than 2 - 3 hours before a game. This depends completely on the size of the meal, however. The larger more filling meals should be eaten 4 - 6 hours before game time. 4 hours is adequate time for food to break down and be available for energy utilization. Your body will perform better when it does not have to work at digesting food and playing hockey at the same time. You will notice the difference.

Hydration. An average hockey player can sweat as much as 5 to 10 pounds of water per game. Drinking as much water as possible before a game is important. How much? "As much as possible, almost to where I feel full from drinking." Rob Blake, Colorado Avalanche. A general rule for water intake is every lost pound from sweating should be equalized by ½ liter of water consumption.

I know that the younger levels (mite, squirt, peewee) don't seem to have sweated that much. If they have a sweaty head and wet equipment, they have sweated enough for their body size and need to hydrate. Sports drinks should be consumed only during or after a game to restore glycogen and electrolytes. They are absorbed quicker than water but provide only a quick energy boost.

By eating a meal rich in complex carbohydrates 4 to 6 hours before a game with a large intake of water, you will give your body the ability to perform at its best.