

Nutrition At Christmas

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Nutritional advice at Christmas. Young football players have higher calorie requirements compared to their less active friends; however, their diets are not too dissimilar and should still encompass a healthy balanced diet. As the festive season draws upon us, it is inevitable that children across the world will consume a greater sugar and calorie intake, increasing their prevalence of tooth decay and potential weight gain from over-indulging.

The festive period is a time of celebration, inactivity, and more so a time to indulge! It is engraved within our culture that the festive period is all about food, treating ourselves and family time. Young athletes are no different. Although we want our young players to be the best football players they can be, children will naturally be tempted to eat foods that aren't the best choices for them.

When children eat they don't really stop to consider whether the food is a good source of protein, fat or carbohydrates. They eat because they are hungry; they eat what they like and avoid what they don't like. Similarly, we eat junk food because it tastes good, not because it is good for us. It is unrealistic to think that young athletes will avoid these foods completely, even more so at Christmas time! Is this a drastic problem this Christmas? Not really. From research we know that:

- Performance-orientated and active individuals are more mindful regarding food intake over the festive season. Some young players can take more control over their diet and recognise that eating a few chocolates is not going to affect their sporting performance this Christmas.
- Children at the preadolescent age (up to 14) especially have increased growth rates therefore require more energy day-day.

But, young players with their parents/coaches help need to understand that they do not require as much energy during the less active festive season as they would when in training and that they can still enjoy the festive season without sabotaging their performance or health goals, Here are some tips on how they can reduce their intake to help maintain their weight:

- Food plate: the way children fill their plate can significantly contribute to their calorie intake. Whilst not in training, young players need to adjust their eating habits to meet their reduced energy requirements during a less active period. Carbohydrates are the football fuel, however when young children are less active, they require less carbohydrates as fuel/energy.
- Fill 1/2 of their plate with protein (e.g. chicken, turkey, beef, lamb, salmon, prawns or cod and so on).
- Fill 1/4 of their plate with carbohydrates (Away from exercise, players should limit quick-releasing, high carbohydrate foods, but instead should opt for slower-releasing carbohydrates such as: sweet potato, wholegrain and wholemeal products and vegetables, all of which can be incorporated into Christmas dinners)
- Fill 1/4 of their plate with a mixture of vegetables and/or salad of their choice (e.g. broccoli, carrots, parsnips, butternut squash, peas, kale, cucumber, tomatoes, peppers and so on).
- Not to drink all their calories as this is less satiating (i.e. filling) than eating actual food. Choose diet/light soft drinks (e.g. Coke Zero, Diet Coke, Sprite Zero etc.) so they can still enjoy the taste and sensation of fizzy pop without the calories, choose a no added sugar flavoured cordial/squash of their preference lower in calories and sugar, or even better consume water regularly throughout the day to stay hydrated.
- Encourage children to eat their meals slowly, allowing their food to digest as they eat it this promotes satiety, feeling of fullness, helping them to recognise when they are full and when they are finishing their plate for the sake of it.
- Eat a rainbow: Fruit and vegetables are low in calories, great at keeping children feeling full and packed full of micronutrients to keep away the common cold this Christmas, ensuring young players are well-rested and fit to return to play after the break.
- Be active during the festive period lets face the facts, as humans we are all going to be eating MORE over the next couple of weeks. One strategy which may benefit children who cant resist the chocolate and treats at Xmas is to move more. Take breaks in between playing with your latest gadgets to go for a walk, play with your siblings or friends, stand up for longer or even fidget some more. All will contribute towards increasing energy requirements.
- Sleep: Many children are sleep deprived during term-time and the football season. Encourage children to take a nap, ensuring they are well-rested upon their return to training after the festive season. Sleep is also a great weight loss tool, whilst children are sleeping they are not eating high-sugar, high-fat, high-calorie foods over the festive period.

Sugar intake:

Regularly consuming foods and drinks high in sugar increases tooth decay. Ideally, no more than 5% of the energy we consume should come from free sugars*. Currently, children and adults across the UK are consuming 2-3 times that amount. *Free sugars - Any sugar added to food or drink products by the manufacturer, cook or consumer including those naturally found in honey, syrups and unsweetened fruit juice. Sugar control is important, rather than taking an extremist approach and depriving children of high-sugar, high-calorie treats this Christmas, choose 'damage limitation' tactics to reduce their intake, for example,

- Adopt a sweet-budget: Parents can set an allowance number of treats for their child just like a money budget.
- Try individually wrapped or smaller versions of cakes, biscuits, chocolates, sweets, fruit juice gain greater control over portions, sugar and calorie intake.
- Sugary drinks including fruit juices are a treat and should only be consumed around exercise greater than 60 minutes.
- Swap flavoured yoghurts which contain a lot of sugar e.g. Muller Corner yoghurts, kids yoghurts for protein-rich yoghurts e.g. Greek Yoghurt, Natural Yoghurt.

What can we do to help?

We can encourage children to be 'mindful eaters', i.e. help them to be aware/conscious of what they are putting into their bodies, without demanding too much of them and acknowledging that there is still room for less-than-perfect food choices within a good diet. Young players should not be punished for over-indulging, though. Punishing children may only lead to more complex issues such as overtraining or under-eating.

Summary:

It is important young players return to training well-rested both physically and mentally after the Christmas break. Whilst we should encourage children to be 'mindful eaters', it is inevitable that they will indulge in high-sugar, high-fat, high-calorie foods over the next couple of weeks. Remember that the food choices which children and their parents make New Year to Christmas are likely to have greater influence on their performance and health than what they do in the week Xmas to New Year!

Coaches and parents are in a privileged position to teach children the value of eating a healthy diet to help them perform better, grow properly and stay healthy. But they should also recognise that young players are still children and in some way, will indulge at Christmas time. Traditional advice: Eat REAL food, Eat less highly processed food, eat more vegetables and don't drink all your calories MERRY CHRISTMAS!