**Nutritional Guidelines for Parents of Athletes**

Proper nutrition plays a key role in athletic performance. Failure to provide enough nutrient dense calories that young athletes need to fuel their bodies, the fluid to maintain hydration, and the vitamins and minerals to support metabolism and tissue growth and repair will result in poor performance and an increased risk for injury and/or illness.

1. *Keep them fed properly*

Athletic children have an increased caloric demand because of the increased physical activity. They will need an estimated 12-15% more calories than if they were sedentary.

*2.) Ensure 3 solid meals and snacks throughout the day*

Calories should be nutrient dense and should be consumed often for optimal athletic performance. Make sure your child eats a healthy breakfast and then eats every 3-4 hours throughout the day to keep blood sugar levels even. Not eating throughout the day causes the body to go into fasting mode. After a long period of time without food, the body will hold on to fat tissue and resort to using lean body tissue and muscle as a fuel source. The body works more efficiently if there are always nutrients fueling the body.

*3.) Keep them hydrated*

When exercising hard, the body produces sweat to naturally cool itself down and therefore, in the process loses fluids. It is important to ensure proper hydration that will make certain fluids are replaced to prevent dehydration. Ensure the athlete is drinking half their body weight in ounces.

Dehydrations signs: thirst, irritability, headaches, weakness, dizziness, cramps, nausea, decreased performance

Water is a good choice, although sports drinks will stimulate thirst and replenish electrolytes lost through sweat.

*4.) Vitamins and Minerals*

Athletes, especially females, need to achieve adequate levels of calcium, particularly while going through puberty. During this stage, hormone levels can decline in athletes who are participating in a great deal of exercise lowering calcium levels that may already be inadequate due to poor nutrition leading to compromised bone formation and premature osteoporosis. Vitamin D is also of great importance because it allows cells to use calcium and muscle fibers to develop and grow normally. Therefore, insufficiency of these vitamins and minerals may cause complications in athletes.

*5)* *Don’t focus on the ‘numbers’*

Actual weight and BMI will increase with the more muscle mass accumulated. The important numbers are cholesterol levels and body fat percentage. These measurements are more accurate in determining one’s overall health.

*6.) Limit fast food intake*

Packed lunches and snacks are a healthier alternative to school lunches and takeout. They are made of fresher ingredients, less processed and include less fat.

*7.) Watch out for warning signs of disordered eating patterns*

Not eating throughout the day, skipping meals, starting special diets, cutting certain foods out, over exercising can all be signs of disordered eating patterns that will prohibit the athlete from getting essential nutrients to keep energy levels up. Other signs include, obsession with weight, counting calories, dramatic weight loss, unusual food rituals, and secretive eating patterns.