

What Is a Gymnast's Diet?

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What Is a Gymnast's Diet? Overview

Like any other athlete, a gymnast has to monitor her diet carefully to ensure she has the right fuel in her body to meet intense training demands. Where a gymnast's diet differs from other athletes is the expectation of power, strength and endurance while maintaining a lean body. British Gymnastics quotes in their coach education guide that "a gymnast needs a controlled diet that maintains an optimum body weight for safety and aesthetic purpose."

The Basics

Small, frequent meals that are low in fat but high in energy are the basic requirements of a gymnast's diet. It is essential that gymnasts have the correct nutrients to withstand the frequency and intensity of their training and to help the body recover.

Focus, endurance and coordination can be affected if the right diet is not maintained. It is vital that gymnasts have an adequate intake of nutrients and minerals, such as calcium to assist in growth and for general health.

Balancing the Diet

Coaches take great care in managing an elite gymnast's diet. As many top-level gymnasts are still growing, it is important that they eat the right foods to assist in bone and muscle growth without gaining weight. The optimum diet is high in carbohydrates, such as whole-grain pasta, fruits and vegetables, giving the gymnast between 60 percent and 65 percent of his total calories. To help muscles grow and repair, 12 percent to 15 percent of a gymnast's diet should be protein from lean meat, fish and eggs. These types of foods are best eaten after training. Finally, fat should make up no more than 25 percent of his diet. However, the total amount of calories a gymnast should consume is dependent on the type and amount of training he does and his body type.

Fluid

Regular fluid intake is necessary for a gymnast to keep properly hydrated. Although the amount of sweat lost during a gymnastics session is less than other sports because of its anaerobic nature, gymnasts are encouraged to replace lost fluids with water and glucose-based drinks during and after training.

Competition Diets

A gymnast's competition diet varies slightly from her regular eating patterns. The day before a competition, she usually will consume a high level of carbohydrates, a large amount of fluid to hydrate the body and will avoid high-fat foods. On the day of a competition, many gymnasts opt for a light breakfast and regular snacks to keep energy levels up. Fluid intake is small and regular to reduce the feeling of being bloated when competing.

Eating Disorders in Gymnastics

A study published in "The New England Journal of Medicine" found that "in the general population, the prevalence of eating disorders is about 1 percent for anorexia and 1 (percent) to 3 percent for bulimia. However, among female athletes, the prevalence of eating disorders is reported to be between 15 percent and 62 percent." The study concluded that this was a result of the pressure to maintain a thin and muscular body. Despite the energy demands on their bodies, research has shown that many gymnasts eat 20 percent to 50 percent less than their required calories. These extraordinary demands on the aesthetics and strength of young men and women can, in some circumstances, lead to the development of eating disorders. Some cases, such as elite American

gymnast Christy Henrich, who died in 1994 from anorexia, have been widely reported, and numerous pieces of research have been conducted on the links between elite gymnastics and disordered eating. In the early 1990s, a National Centre for Clinical Audit (NCCA) survey showed that over half of the gymnastics clubs questioned knew of gymnasts on their team suffering from an eating disorder, "a far greater percentage than in any other sport."

What do Olympic gymnasts eat?

Low-carb diet provides energy spurts needed in the sport



Amy Sancetta / AP

Gymnast Stephen McCain drinks water during a warm-up session at the Arrowhead Pond in Anaheim, Calif., on June 24. He started eating a low-carb diet well before it became popular.

AP Associated Press

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ANAHEIM, Calif. - With rock-hard biceps and abs that would make a bodybuilder jealous, Stephen McCain doesn't need to [lose weight](#). Yet count him as a devotee of the increasingly popular low-carbohydrate diet.

A 2000 U.S. Olympian trying to make it back to the Games this year, McCain started doing the high-protein, low-carb thing well before it became the biggest

diet fad in the country. "I used to think it was all about carbs, carbs, carbs to get the energy," he said. "But over time, I realized I performed better when I kept that stuff in check."

That's because gymnastics, unlike swimming or long-distance running, is considered an "anaerobic" sport, one in which short, intense bursts of power are much more important than endurance.

"Over the span of a three-hour workout, we're probably only up on the equipment for 15 minutes," McCain said. The longest routine for a man or woman is the floor exercise, which lasts between 60 and 90 seconds.

Energy spurts needed

Thus, having lots of complex sugars stored up — the kind produced by carbohydrates — does not help a gymnast that much. Those energy spurts are best provided by a diet [high in protein](#). Most gymnasts try to get between 60 percent and 70 percent of their calories from proteins (like meats and cheeses), the rest from carbs (like whole-grain pasta, fruits, vegetables) and fats (like oils from peanuts). And, as has been proven by all the Atkins, South Beach and Zone diets so popular these days, high-protein regimens help gymnasts keep their weight down.

The weight issue can be a touchy subject in gymnastics, especially on the women's side. Eating disorders have long been common in a sport in which young girls are urged to stay lean, yet keep the muscle that allows them to explode and do such amazing tricks on the floor, uneven bars and beam.

But done correctly, diets can produce gymnasts like Courtney McCool, Tabitha Yim or national co-champion Courtney Kupets, all fit, trim young women who hardly seem to fit some of the worst stereotypes of the sport. They eat several times a day, all in small quantities: egg whites for breakfast, a small piece of chicken for lunch, small [snacks](#) of cheese and vegetables in between meals and maybe some fish and fruit for dinner.

Is it what most 16-year-old girls would be eating? Probably not, but these young women are in fabulous shape. And with the desire to be a world-class gymnast come sacrifices, the likes of which all these athletes know they must make when they get into the sport.

"It's just something you have to deal with," McCool said. "You have to be not just physically tough, but mentally tough."

Weight issues

No sport has been watched more closely — or criticized — for its weight issues than gymnastics. Christy Henrich, a member of the 1989 U.S. world championship team, died at age 22 in 1994 after long battles with anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Stories abound of former American team coordinator Bela Karolyi hectoring his young gymnasts for being out of shape and fat.

Just as revealing are myriad pictures of 14-year-old girls who look no older than 8 or 9.

"You see things that are inappropriate that shouldn't be done," longtime gymnastics coach Steve Rybacki said. "The key is finding the right balance."

Steve, who coaches alongside his wife, Beth, a former gymnast herself, said he has learned over the years that weight issues with female gymnasts are best discussed woman-to-woman.

"Getting that kind of feedback from a guy can be a real negative thing," Rybacki said.

On the women's side of the sport, diets can be more easily monitored simply because female gymnasts at the Olympic level are usually between ages 15 and 19 — in other words, they still live at home.

Nutritionist at camp

Once a month, they go to training camps held at a Texas ranch owned by Karolyi and his wife, Martha, who is the current national team coordinator. Their daughter, Andrea, is a certified nutritionist who does the food service at the camps.

The menu for [lunch](#) at one recent training camp was a salad bar, pork loin, vegetables, potatoes and fruit.

"My mom and I work on the menus," Andrea Karolyi said. "She's very involved in the nutrition. She wants to make sure everything is well-balanced."

The biggest problem, Rybacki said, is finding enough kinds of food to keep teenage girls — in large part, a notoriously picky bunch of eaters anyway — happy.

"You're taking a menu that's already limited because there aren't a lot of foods they like," Rybacki said, "and then you're cutting it down even further. That's the challenge."

Most of the men, meanwhile, are in their 20s, and don't get as much help.

"I'm 30 years old, so I'm going to do what I'm going to do," McCain said. "But I think I've finally got a real good grip on what's right."

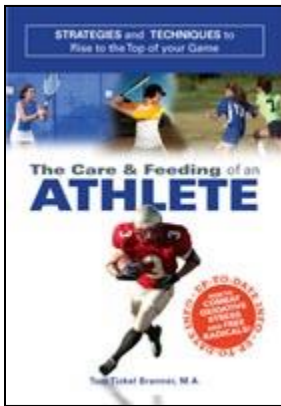
Many see irony in the fact that one of America's best female gymnasts, Carly Patterson, is being featured on the side of McDonald's bags this summer as part of the fast-food chain's Olympics promotions.

Rybacki said, however, that a little bit of off-the-diet eating is allowed, "as long as it's looked at as a reward, something special, and not part of the regular routine."

McCool certainly knows.

"I don't like hamburgers," she said. "I eat a lot of chicken. Some steak. Mostly just chicken ... or Taco Bell."

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Toni's Smoothie Recipe for Athletes (and Tired Parents)

This can be altered to fit your taste buds. It is a complete meal replacement, quick and healthy breakfast or after-training snack to reload muscle glycogen. This provides over half your days worth of calcium – all from plant sources. I have found that a good blender makes all the difference. My kids like it to be smooth! Play around with it until you find a combination that you love.

French Vanilla Smoothie with Fruit

- 1 cup of vanilla soy milk, plain soy milk, almond milk, rice milk, water, or calcium fortified juice
- 1 scoop of French Vanilla Juice Plus+ Complete® (See Resource Guide to Order)
- 1 ripe banana
- 1 Tablespoon brewer's yeast or nutritional yeast (provides B vitamins, an important addition for vegetarians)

- 1 Tablespoon ground flax seed for Omega 3's (just put whole seeds in your coffee grinder)
- Frozen or fresh fruit -- I like to use a few strawberries, peaches, raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries
- Ice (optional but makes it thicker and colder) Blend until smooth.

Chocolate Banana Smoothie

- 1 cup of vanilla soy milk, plain soy milk, rice milk, almond milk, or water
- 1 scoop of Dutch Chocolate Juice Plus+ Complete® (See Resource Guide to Order)
- 1 ripe banana
- 1 Tablespoon brewer's yeast or nutritional yeast
- 1 Tablespoon ground flax seed for Omega 3's (just put whole seeds in your coffee grinder)
- 1 cup of ice Blend until smooth



German swimmer and gymnast to add glamour to the Olympic team

July 23, 2008

Swimmer Britta Steffen and gymnast Fabian Hambuechen look forward to give Germany gold in glamour sports at the upcoming Beijing Olympics in August 2008.

The 24-year-old Steffen is hoping to deliver Germany's first swim gold since 1992 in the 50m or 100m freestyle races. Steffen rose to stardom with four golds and one silver at the 2006 European championships, although she had to settle for a bronze and a silver at the 2007 world events.

Hambuechen, German Sportsman of the Year in 2007, won world championship gold for Germany on the horizontal bar, all-around silver and team bronze. The diminutive 20-year-old, known as the "gymnastics professor," now hopes to cap his career in Beijing.

Germany's medals for a top placing in the tally normally come from sports such as canoeing, rowing, fencing, equestrian and shooting - and not so much the big three of athletics, swimming and gymnastics.

"We will hopefully be helped by the sports in which we have traditionally been strong, such as canoeing or riding," said German Olympic Committee (DOSB) Director General Michael Vesper.

Germany came sixth in the 2004 Athens Olympics with 13 gold medals, 16 silver and 20 bronze. Its overall 49 medals got it joint fourth place with Australia, with the US leading the table at 36-39-27 medals and the overall list with 102 medals.

The current German Olympic team of 436 athletes also features table tennis ace Timo Boll, who hopes to challenge the hosts at their number one sport. Canoeing 2004 champion Andreas Dittmer, dressage star Isabelle Werth, the men's field hockey and handball teams are also major medal hopes.