



## THE JOURNAL OF YOUTH RUNNING

# FUELING YOUNG RUNNERS

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Runners need fuel to run. For most runners, it isn't some special high-octane fuel, but simply a good balance of fruits, grains, dairy products, vegetables and protein. For adult runners, this is mostly understood. For those who come to the starting line carrying a few extra pounds, they mostly know why. For adults, eating is about decisions. Some are good decisions, some not so good.

With children, it is the parents or caregivers who choose - or allow - what children eat. We, as coaches, are positioned to help our young runners and their parents learn why many foods popular to children and teens, and unchecked snacking, are harmful.

The author, as a coach of young runners, holds a parent's meeting at the start of each season or program. Included with the handouts is a fact sheet on the importance of healthy eating that will help parents and caregivers make good choices in the grocery store, in planning meals, and in monitoring what their young runners eat.

Here are 12 core principles to help young runners have the fuel to perform well, to be healthy, to be fit.

### THINK FUEL, NOT DIET

When you talk to children about nutrition, avoid using the word "diet," even when talking about what they eat every day – their diet. To some children, diet means one thing, losing weight, and it is best to avoid the subject of losing weight. Leave that to trained professionals. Talk about food being fuel and their need to have the right kind of fuel to run well.

### PLAN YOUR MEALS

When parents plan meals ahead of time they are more likely to make good choices. And even better yet, have the kids help plan a meal occasionally. Give them choices – this or that - but with both choices being good ones. And be sure the adults eat what the kids have planned, and, of course, tell them how good it tastes.



### CHANGE THE CLOCK

Many kids start the day with a quick breakfast, often on the run. Lunch is at school. Dinner, the main meal of the day, is when parents get home, with only a few hours before bedtime. Sound familiar?

As normal as that is, it is the reverse that makes the most sense. It is better to start with a good breakfast, providing the fuel their body needs for the day. This should be followed by a healthy lunch, with dinner neither being late nor heavy.

### **CUT THE SODA!**

To have an immediate impact on your child's health, eliminate, or at least cut back on soda pop. Pop is mostly carbonated water, high fructose corn syrup (worse than sugar), sodium benzoate (a preservative), artificial flavors and food coloring, none of which offers any food value. What children need for building strong bones is calcium, something soda pop does not have.

### **SUGAR IS EVERYWHERE**

It is amazing what parents will discover when reading the ingredients of what their children are about to eat. Take sugar for starters. There is more sugar in some yogurts than there is in many candy bars. And some very popular children's cereals contain as much as five teaspoons of sugar in every serving. This is nearly two times more sugar than most children should consume in an entire day!

### **WATCH FOR MARKETING AIMED AT KIDS**

Running icon Frank Shorter astutely said "...we have marketed our way into this health crisis." Boy, is he right! The target market for cereal, snacks and candy are young children. They are packaged in bright colors that draw a child's attention and are found at eye level (the lower shelves) in grocery stores, where kids can see them. Then there's the packaging. Images of happy children being physically active; playing outdoors, communicates that whatever is in the package is healthy and fun. Even the checkout lane in many stores, where candy is within arm's length, sets a trap to reward children for going shopping with mom or dad.

### **LIMIT ADULT SPORTS DRINKS**

Sports drinks are a huge profit-driven industry that has targeted our children but offer little or nothing to their overall health. For athletes who train hard for more than 60 minutes, sports drinks may have some value. For everyone else, they offer little more than extra calories, sugar and sodium to their diet. Kids, when running, or for that matter doing any sport, should drink water before, during and after each practice or competition.



### **THE TOP PRIORITY**

Nutritionists tell us that in terms of overall health and vigor, the time children spend at play or in youth sports is second in importance to what they eat. If we want our children and young runners to be healthy, to be athletic, to be strong, we need to help them understand how what they eat will affect how they perform. And we need to make healthy eating a family commitment.

### **STOP THE GRAZING**

Don't permit children to eat in front of the TV, at their computer, or in their bedroom. These can lead to the mindless consumption of a huge number of calories, and probably all unhealthy calories.

### **BEWARE OF RESTAURANT MEALS**

Kids' meals in many restaurants, and not just the fast food restaurants, can be anything but healthy. Macaroni and cheese with a slice of pizza or side of French fries? Really? Or what about adding a cup of applesauce or a small bottle of fat-free milk to the fries and burger or fried chicken and calling it healthy? These are not healthy, not by a long shot.

### WATCH THE SODIUM

Processed foods, especially cheesy foods; deli and luncheon meats; cured meats like bacon; and many brands of canned soups and chili, are loaded with sodium (salt). So are prepackaged lunches that are aggressively marketed to kids and single serving packages of chips. Yes, prepackaged foods are convenient, but high sodium levels present a serious health risk, even in children.

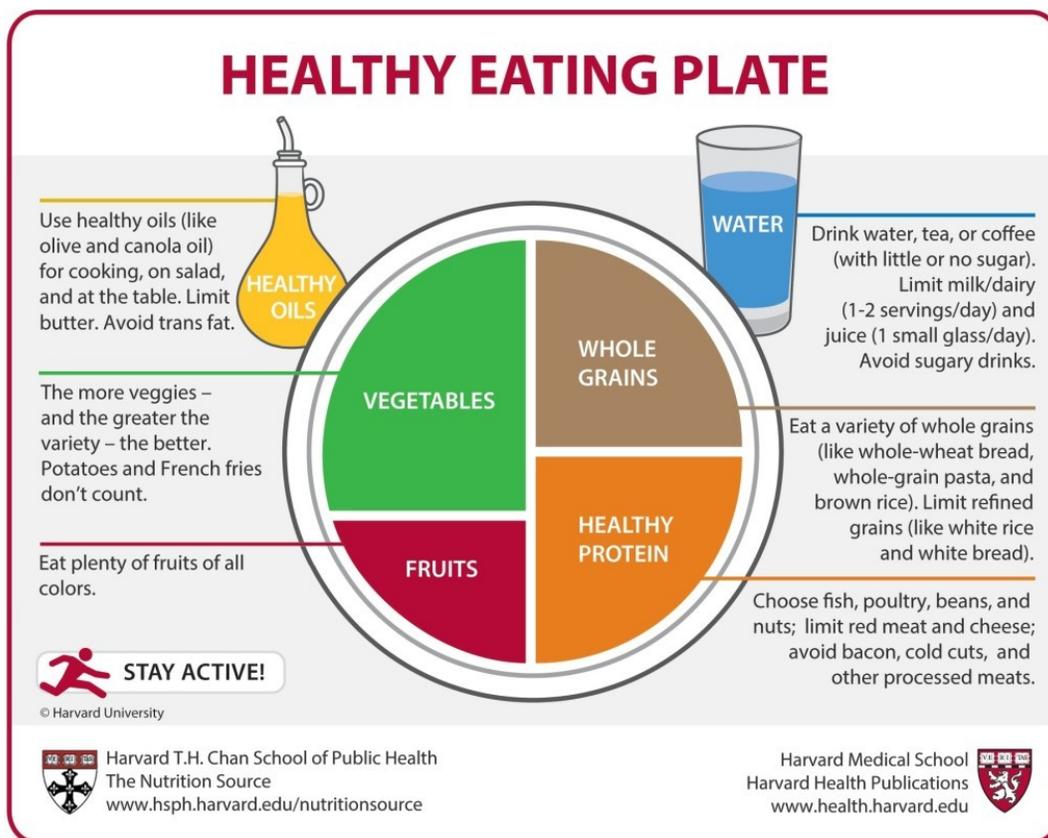
### SPORTS BARS

Anything that looks and tastes like a candy bar but is marketed as a nutrition or sports bar should send up a warning flag. Yes, some do come close to what they claim, but only for hard-core adult athletes who burn a huge number of calories in each workout. For kids, most sports bars only add calories.

### LEARN MORE

There are many great resources on the Internet for parents and coaches wanting to learn more about nutrition. One of the best sources is found at:

<https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-eating-plate/>



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