

Protein supplements for athletes, more a convenience than a requirement

Protein, protein, protein. Athletes, often young ones, can get obsessed with it. If you are a parent of a young athlete who wants to start using protein supplements what should you do? The following are a few ideas to help you in your response to your young athlete's desire for self-improvement.

At minimum, it is important to discuss with an athlete what the supplement's desired effect is, and whether that desire is consistent with his or her performance, body composition, and health goals. First emphasize that an athlete's protein requirements can be met consuming standard dietary protein. Next, find out just how much knowledge your athlete has about protein and ask if he or she is familiar with the essential 8 to 10 amino acids that are required daily for good nutrition and what the recommended daily intake of protein for an athlete should be*. Some other good questions at this point are how many calories are being consumed on a daily basis, if a written log is being kept, and how the calories are balanced between carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. These are basic questions about nutrition, and it's important to first establish a nutritional framework that takes into account the entire spectrum, rather than just protein.

This beginning examination of the situation can help find out if the proper research has been done. If it sounds like your young athlete has done some research then ask to see the sources of the information. If the source of information is a glossy paged "fitness" or "bodybuilding" magazine with an over-muscled gargoyle on the cover send your youngster elsewhere for information. Many of these publications exist almost solely to sell dietary supplements and cannot always be relied upon for accurate, scientific information.

Sources such as any good nutrition almanac, the National Strength & Conditioning Association (NSCA), American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and The American Dietetic Association (ADA) should be consulted for reliable information. Introducing a young athlete to unbiased sources of information can help launch them towards a lifetime of making informed decisions.

Only when priorities like adequate rest, complete nutrition from a variety of whole foods, and proper hydration are being met should protein supplements be considered. Keep in mind one of the most beneficial time periods for liquid nutrition is the first 20 minutes after a workout session. Also keep in mind that recent research shows that a post workout drink as basic as chocolate skim milk is one of the best "supplements" there is when cost, convenience, and effectiveness are factored in.

**According to the NSCA the best guide is still the joint position statement from the ACSM and the Dietitians of Canada. This position statement suggests 12% to 15% of energy consumed should be from protein or 1.2 to 1.4 grams per kilogram (g/kg) of bodyweight for endurance athletes and 1.4 to 1.8 g/kg of bodyweight for strength athletes. (1 kilogram = 2.2046 pounds)*

Steve Howard operates the Steve Howard Fitness training studio at the Weight Room in Rapid City. He is a Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist through the NSCA and an appointed member of the USA Powerlifting coaching committee.