

The Biggest Mistake Most Soccer Players Make Isn't on the Soccer Field

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Most soccer players don't associate food with performance. To them, food is an unthinking response to hunger, and whatever fills their belly is just fine.

That is a serious mistake. A soccer player's performance depends on health, and health depends on nutrition. It is a simple correlation that is undeniably true.

Look at the picture to the right. As that player prepares to strike the ball hundreds of muscles are contracting and relaxing, nerves and hormones are firing lightning quick electrical and chemical messages, blood is delivering oxygen and nutrients to a trillion cells, lungs are pumping and the brain is taking millions of signals from every part of the body and near instantaneously coordinating it all into a well-struck ball.

Now consider all the passes, shots, headers, tackles and miles of running in a game. Where does your body get what it needs to power this incredible symphony of motion? From nutrients in your food and drink.

With that in mind, it truly is perplexing that one of the most underestimated and overlooked aspects of training for soccer is nutrition.

There are some 40 known essential nutrients for the human body. These are "essential" because your body needs them to function properly, but cannot make them in sufficient quantities to meet its needs. Therefore you must get them from your food.

Vitamins, minerals, fat, protein, carbohydrates and water are all nutrients. In addition, there are thousands of other "non-nutrients" in foods, such as phytochemicals (*phyto* means plant), that have profound health benefits. Many of these are just being discovered. Your body uses all of these nutrients and chemicals in thousands of interactive ways to build and maintain physical and mental wellness.



In a Nutshell

- What you eat or don't eat can dramatically affect your health and soccer performance.
- Nutrients work together in your body like instruments in an orchestra. Come up short on just a few and your health and soccer performance can suffer.
- Nutrient deficiencies often go undetected and can cause serious consequences.

Limit water intake and dehydration can cause exhaustion, muscle cramps and an inability to focus. A vitamin C deficiency can weaken your defense against illness and make your joints more susceptible to injury. A lack of calcium or vitamin D can lead to weak bones. Insufficient and unbalanced amounts of quality protein, fat and carbohydrates can cause fatigue, energy and mood swings, poor endurance, frequent illness, body fat issues and disturbed sleep. The list goes on and on.

A worrisome part of nutrient deficiencies is that they often go unnoticed until serious damage has been done. For example, you won't feel your bones getting weak from a calcium deficiency, but you will feel it when one breaks.

Here is an example of how improper nutrition can devastate soccer performance:

A former player of mine suffered from severe pain on the front of both her shins, a condition commonly called shin splints. She turned to her doctor for help, and X-rays revealed many small stress fractures in her shin bones. She rested and did physical therapy for months, but the pain didn't go away.

The suggestion of a possible nutrient deficiency was casually shrugged aside by her doctor. As a last resort, both her legs were put in casts for five months followed by more physical therapy. But as soon as she started to play soccer again, the pain returned.

The cause turned out to be a mineral deficiency, and with proper nutrition, her bones healed and the pain went away in just one month.

So if you think your food choices won't dramatically affect your health and soccer performance, think again. Your body wants you to eat well. It wants to be strong and healthy. It works hard to build and repair itself. All you have to do is take care of it and feed it the nutrients it needs.

Don't be food-unaware and end up with injury and health problems. That's not a fun way to live and play. Instead, become food-wise so you can live and perform at the top of your game.

Proper nutrition is easy to do and the benefits are life-long, which I hope is the same amount of time you plan on playing this wonderful and demanding game of soccer.

Until next time – Be Well, Play Well.

About the Author

Curt Thompson is a practicing nutritionist and the author of the *Soccer Nutrition Handbook* (www.NutritionCoaches.com). He is also a nationally licensed soccer coach and runs the Advanced Training Program at FC Boulder in Colorado.