

# Taking Control

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Controlling a soccer ball while those around you try to take it away is not easy. It takes years of training and hard work to be able to handle a ball in all situations.

Fortunately, nutrition is a lot easier to control than a soccer ball. It just takes some forethought and a willingness to be in control of your food. With just a little planning, you can have good-tasting, healthy food available to you at home, school, work, and when traveling.

An effective way to do this is to take three minutes each evening and answer the following questions:

- What time do I need to wake up to prepare and eat a healthy breakfast?
- What will I eat for lunch?
- What snacks do I need to bring with me?
- What food and drink do I need before and after my soccer practice or game?

If you are a parent, answer these questions with your young player. If you are a player, get these questions answered so you are “food prepared” each day. When it comes to nutrition and health, he who fails to plan, plans to fail.

Most people end up eating unhealthy food because they don’t plan ahead and then get stuck eating whatever is available when they get hungry. Often that is less-healthy food prepared by someone else. Fast-food restaurants and vending machines prey on the unprepared. Instead, be food ready and “drive by” instead of “drive thru”, and let the vending machines go hungry.

Lunch is often away from home, either at work or school. The best lunch is the one you prepare and bring with you. It only takes a few minutes each morning or the night before to make a sandwich and a healthy snack, or package up some dinner leftovers.

Traveling can be a nutritional challenge, in particular flying. After you pack your bags, take a few minutes and pack some food. Examples: a healthy sandwich, a homemade mix of nuts and dried fruit, carrot and celery sticks, some whole fruit, etc. At least then you won’t be stuck eating airport junk food or microwaved glop on a plastic tray. Traveling is hard enough on your body without the added burden of unwholesome food.



## In a Nutshell

- Make an effort to control the handling and preparation of your food from source to mouth.
- Plan ahead and pack your own lunch and snacks.
- Eat at home more often.
- Make 18 out of 21 meals each week “healthy”.

On the road or not, unhealthy food is everywhere. To control what you eat, you must minimize how much “delivered”, “drive-thru”, “hot and ready”, “instant”, “microwavable”, “bucket”, “extra crispy”, “nuggets”, “deep-fried” and/or “super-size” are associated with your food. When food is prepared by someone else, you rarely know its quality, how it is prepared or its cleanliness. In short, you don’t know what you are eating.

**T**he good news is that healthy food is also everywhere. Gathering and preparing that food is less expensive than restaurant dining and is a rewarding family activity. Home cooking may not be as convenient but what’s more important, convenience or health?

**Spend \$20 per week on junk food and you will waste over \$1000 per year and diminish your health and soccer performance**

Does that mean you never go out to eat again? No. Restaurant dining is fine in moderation. Just know that if you eat away from home more than at home, then someone else more in control of your food than you.

**You don’t need to be perfect when it comes to food. Instead, follow the 18-21 Rule and make 18 out of 21 meals each week healthy.**

Your body can handle the occasional unhealthy meal or “chicken nugget” excursion and it will allow you to relax and enjoy special occasions like birthday parties or pizza night with your team.

Here is a true story that demonstrates the importance of being in control of your food:

*"During my senior soccer season at college, I received an invite to try out for a professional soccer team. The tryout was one month after my season ended. So when my teammates put away their cleats, I began training hard—twice a day for a month. Fitness runs in the morning before class and skill training before dinner and study.*

*After a long drive to the tryout, I went out with a friend to a local restaurant for a pre-tryout dinner. Later that night, I became ill with food poisoning and vomited my way through the entire tryout the next day. It didn’t matter how hard I had trained or if I was a good player. The fact that I was not in control of my food at such a critical time sealed my fate."*

Hard lesson learned. Be proactive and take control of your food. Enough said.

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](http://www.NutritionCoaches.com)). He is also a nationally licensed soccer coach and runs the Advanced Training Program at FC Boulder in Colorado.