



Fuelling Young Athletes

Simple, practical nutrition for energy, growth & performance



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Hi, I'm Anna — a NZ Registered Clinical Nutritionist, Performance Nutritionist, and a Hibiscus Coast local

Our family has been part of the local football community for nearly 10 years, from Little Kickers right through, and you'll often find me on the sidelines cheering on my two boys, including my youngest, who is a keen goalkeeper.

I created this guide because I kept seeing talented kids, including my own, fade late in games and training, not from lack of fitness, but from lack of fuel.

This is the practical, no-fuss information I wish every sports family had.

My professional work focuses mostly on active adults and recreational athletes, but as a mum of two sporty boys, this stuff is close to my heart. If you see me on the sidelines, please come and say hi — I love chatting about all things food, fuel, and performance.

WHY FUEL MATTERS

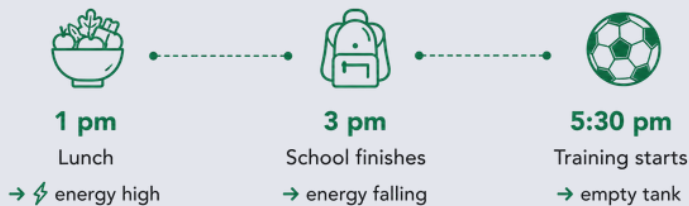
Young athletes cannot perform their best at afternoon training on the lunch they ate at 1 pm. If they feel flat, low in energy, or struggle to keep up later in the day, it is often not a fitness problem.

More commonly, the fuel tank is running low, or they're dehydrated — and simply pushing harder is not the solution.

- 💡 Most young athletes need:
- An after-school refuel
 - Small top-up 30 min before training/game

Fuel and hydration are part of performance, too.

How Energy Drops Through the Day



The fix is simple — more fuel and consistent hydration.



Some young athletes eat “healthy” but still do not fuel enough for how active they are.

Young athletes generally perform, recover, and grow best when they are well fuelled, not under-fuelled.

TWO TYPES OF FUEL

“Food for growth” and “sports fuel” often look completely different – and that’s okay. They just serve different jobs in a young athlete’s body.

Everyday Food = Health & Growth

Looks like

Full meals (containing carbs, fibre, protein, and fat)

Foods

- Whole-grain bread
- Fruit + veg
- Dairy
- Eggs/meat/fish/chicken
- Beans
- Fats (nuts/seeds/butter, etc.)

Supports

- Growth
- Bones + muscles
- Immunity
- Focus + recovery



Performance Fuel = Energy for Sport

Looks like

Quick fuel (containing simple carbs, low in fat, fibre, and protein)

Foods

- Banana or other fruit
- White bread/bagel + honey
- Rice crackers
- Pretzels
- Crumpet with jam
- Fruit Juice/sports drink

Supports

- Fast energy
- Movement + speed
- Training + sport



Everyday food builds the car.
Performance fuel fills the tank.

Both are important. They simply do different jobs.



EVERYDAY MEALS BUILD THE BASE

These meals form the foundation for your athlete each week. Most main meals and snacks ideally include a balance of the following building blocks:



Carb
(energy)



Protein
(growth)



Colour
(vitamins)



Dairy
(protein +
calcium/strength)



Healthy fat
(long fuel +
vit absorption)

What does a balanced meal look like for a young athlete?

Breakfast ideas



- Weet-Bix + milk + fruit + honey
- Toast + butter + eggs + fruit + glass of milk
- Toast with peanut butter and banana + glass of milk

Lunch Ideas



- Cheese sandwich + yoghurt + carrots + fruit
- Leftover pasta in a thermos + CalciYum + fruit
- Chicken/veg wrap + fruit + yoghurt

Snack Ideas



- Cheese + crackers + fruit
- Carrot sticks + hummus + crackers
- Toast + peanut butter + glass of milk
- Smoothie with milk + fruit

Dinner Ideas



- Spaghetti bolognese + grated veg + cheese
- Meat + potato/rice + vegetables + yoghurt
- Nachos with veg, mince, beans & cheese
- Veg and chicken stir-fry + rice + yoghurt for dessert

 Frozen fruit and vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh options.

PERFORMANCE FOODS FILL THE TANK

Within 2 hours of training or games, choose foods that are:
Quick, easy energy to provide fuel for performance without any tummy discomfort.



What kind of foods work best before training or games?



CARBS

Easy energy



LOW FIBRE

Gentle on the stomach



LOW FAT

Easier to digest and absorb



MODERATE TO LOW PROTEIN

Support without slowing digestion



EASY TO DIGEST

Quick energy, no tummy discomfort

💡 Around training and games, quicker and sometimes more refined carbohydrates can be useful because they provide fast, easy-to-digest energy for sport.



TIMING MATTERS

Fuelling for sport is not just about what you eat, but when you eat.
Different timings support different needs.



3+ hours before training/game = Balanced meal.

Think nourishing school lunch during weekdays or a good hearty breakfast before a Saturday game.

💡 Weekend game: An earlier breakfast usually allows for a bigger, more balanced breakfast. Later breakfasts closer to kick-off are better kept a little lighter, lower in fat and fibre, and easier to digest

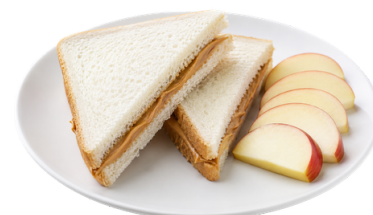


2 hours before training/game = A lighter meal or filling snack.

Think 3 pm after-school meal before training or a lighter breakfast before a weekend game, closer to kick-off.

✔ Lower fibre ✔ Lower fat ✔ Moderate protein ✔ Steady energy

Examples: peanut butter sandwich with fruit | smoothie with milk + banana + Honey | muesli/weetbix + milk + fruit | flavoured milk / breakfast drink + fruit



20-30 mins before training/game = Important top-up fuel (20-30 g carbs).

Think small, quick energy that can help top up fuel stores before training or games without sitting heavy in the stomach.

✔ low fibre ✔ low fat ✔ low protein ✔ Easy to digest

Examples: peaches in jelly cup + rice crackers | dried mango pieces + pretzels | banana | orange | applesauce pouch | glass of fruit juice



After training/game (within 60 mins) = refuel and recover.

A combination of carbohydrates, protein, and fluids helps replace energy used during exercise, support muscle recovery, and rehydrate for the next session.

✔ Carbs for energy ✔ Protein for muscle repair ✔ Fluids for rehydration

Examples: chocolate milk | breakfast drink + banana | balanced dinner/meal/lunch



💡 Chocolate milk or flavoured milk can make a great recovery drink after games, naturally providing a useful balance of carbohydrates, protein, fluids, and electrolytes to support recovery.

HYDRATION & GROWTH

Even mild dehydration reduces focus and effort. Regular small sips during the day beat last-minute chugging.

How long they train matters too:

- Training up to 60 min → Water is enough when they've fuelled well before and eat well after.
- Training over 90 min → Consider a sports drink only if no food-based top-ups are available.

Hydration Checklist:

- Drink with breakfast
- Water bottle at school
- Sip after school and with snacks
- Water during training
- Hydrate after sport



Electrolyte Tips

- Useful in heat, long sessions or heavy sweaters
- Try an electrolyte tablet in water
- Home option: water + pinch of salt + lemon
- Most winter sessions: water is enough



Sip regularly
throughout
the day



Drink before,
during & after
games/training



Add electrolytes
on hot days or
long sessions



Check urine colour:
Pale yellow = hydrated
Dark yellow = dehydrated

Growth Spurts = Hidden Energy Drain

Always hungry, sore legs, tired, moody, and a sudden height jump?
→ They often need more fuel – not more pressure or discipline.

Simple add-ons: bigger breakfast | extra lunch item | bigger snack before training | more carbs at dinner | milk or yoghurt and fruit before bed

YOUR FUELLING CHECKLIST

If it's in the house, it's easy. Stock these basics and fuelling your athlete takes care of itself.

Pantry & Fridge Staples for Busy Sporty Families

Everyday Meal Staples:

- Weet-Bix
- Oats
- Granola
- Wholemeal bread
- Rice & pasta
- Potatoes/kumara
- Milk (fresh or long-life)
- Eggs/meat/fish/chicken
- Cheese & yoghurt
- Peanut butter
- Frozen berries
- Frozen or fresh vegetables
- Seasonal fruit
- Reusable water bottle

Training Snacks:

- White bread/crumpets / bagels
- Bananas or other fruit
- Pretzels & rice crackers
- Honey & jam
- Dried fruit / dried mango
- Fruit juice boxes
- Muesli bars / OSM bars
- Frooze balls
- Applesauce pouches
- Peaches in jelly pots
- Breakfast drink
- CalciYum / flavoured milk

Good fuelling today helps build strong athletes and healthy humans for life.

