



Nutrition in the Off-Season & Sports Transitions

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Jen works with ICYF to provide expert advice on sports nutrition and healthy eating to the students and families of Indianola. As a board-certified sports dietitian, Jen owns a private practice that focuses on helping athletes stay on the cutting edge with superior nutrition to enhance performance with safety and efficacy.

In the off-season, the duration and intensity of your training will vary dramatically. Changes in your activity level change the level of nutrition needed for you in order to maintain (or change) your current body composition. Depending on your sport, different body compositions may be required for optimal performance. What is the best way to make these changes in a healthful way without negatively impacting your training? Included are the top three tips to make off-season and/or sports transition a success.

1. Make Changes in the Off-Season NOT Pre-Season.

While most athletes talk about losing weight, what they want to achieve, is a decrease in body fat. The goal is to lose body fat while preserving muscle mass. Body weight is a poor measure of the amount of fat we carry, and changes measured on the scale do not necessarily reflect changes in body fat stores. Using measurements to determine body composition will provide a better overall picture of your body changes.

When aiming to lower body fat, there are no quick fixes that are sustainable. Cutting calories too quickly only results in loss of muscle. A long-term approach is required to lower body fat levels while maintaining the ability to train effectively. Therefore, changes in body composition are meant to be done between sports. The ultimate goal is to adjust your energy balance between calorie intake and your off-season fitness routine.

2. Practice nutrient timing.

Adequate carbohydrate intake in the form of whole grains, fruit, low-fat dairy products and certain vegetables are important. However, the timing of *when* you eat your carbohydrate can allow you to maintain energy levels for training while decreasing your overall energy intake. Focusing carbohydrate intake in the hours before and after training is a critical practice. It is important that athletes work with a board-certified sports dietitian when practicing nutrient timing to prevent the negative impacts of energy restriction. If food/nutrient timing is not planned properly, a deficit in calories can cause injury, illness, loss of muscle mass, poor immunity and a decreased academic performance.

In addition, daily protein intake may be increased to help the athlete feel satisfied on a lower amount of total calories.

However, protein needs should not exceed one gram protein per pound of body weight. Excessive protein intake can cause unwanted weight gain and tends to focus attention away from much needed fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

3. Decrease dietary fat.

Fat is the most calorie dense macronutrient we consume. It has nine calories per gram compared to carbohydrates and protein that both contain four calories per gram. Therefore, the best way to sustainably decrease body fat is to decrease the amount of dietary fat you are eating while also controlling total energy intake. It is important to remember that some fat in the diet is necessary. Getting your needed fats from olive oils, nuts, nut butters, seeds and fatty fish are optimal. However, many times athletes consume too much fat from unhealthy sources and the body composition changes they desire can't occur, regardless of training. The amount of dietary fat you should consume depends on your individual size and body composition goal.



Approximate total fat intake for high school athletes in the off-season:

Females 40- 65 grams per day

Males 45- 80 grams per day

General rule is to consume 1g/kg bodyweight.

Quick-Tips for Reducing Dietary Fat:

- Select lean cuts of meat (healthy cuts can be found on the "Athlete Shopping List" guide.)
 - Eat more fruits and vegetables
 - Try reduced-fat crackers, canned soups, chips and cheese
 - Limit fat add-ons (e.g., sour cream, high-fat salad dressings, butter, and margarine.)
 - Select low-fat or fat-free dairy products
 - Limit fried foods
 - If dining out or eating fast food, limit fried food and omit the "special sauces" on sandwiches (healthy dining out alternatives can be found in the "Food to Fuel when on the Move" guide.)
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NOTE: Off-season nutrition and body composition changes have been shown to generate a greater in-season performance outcome. If you have questions or concerns, please contact Jen DeWall RDN, CSSD, LD to schedule a complimentary 15-minute sports nutrition coaching call.

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