

9 Important Things to Know About Intuitive Eating for Young Athletes

You may have noticed the term 'intuitive eating' cropping up on blogs, websites, magazines, and podcasts lately. Maybe your young athlete even mentioned it as a nutritional approach they would like to try. While intuitive eating can be helpful for many people, it's important to know that it has some limitations for the athletic population, especially [those athletes who may struggle with disordered eating](#).

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Stephanie Miezín, MS, a registered dietitian and board-certified specialist in sports dietetics, explains some of the nuances around intuitive eating and its application for athletes.

1. Understand what intuitive eating means

The concept of intuitive eating is based on several key [principles developed by its founders](#) in the 1990s, and includes tenets like eating according to hunger, rejecting diet culture, making peace with food, and respecting your body. At a glance, it's a healthy way of looking at food and how your body is nourished. And while some dietitians and nutrition experts refer to intuitive eating exactly according to those principles, many people have started using the term 'intuitive eating' more generally as a way to describe being better able to listen to and understand signals from the body around hunger and fullness, says Miezín.

2. Intuitive eating can help an athlete learn about themselves

For busy student-athletes, learning to feel 'full' and notice hunger cues can lead to a big improvement in how they eat and how they perform. Often, students are stuck in such a scheduled routine of eating at specific times based on class and training schedules that they don't pause to even ask if they are hungry. Tuning into feelings of hunger and fullness can help an athlete make sure they are eating enough before practice, and fueling adequately afterwards as well, says Miezín.

3. Intuitive eating can remove food guilt for some athletes

Often, athletes get information and misinformation from a variety of sources, and these pieces of nutrition intel can lead to skipping meals or avoiding former favorite foods. Leaning into intuitive eating can undo some of that misinformation that leads athletes to skip meals or avoid the hamburger in favor of a salad—even if what the athlete really wanted was the burger. "Intuitive eating means coming back to listening to our bodies and honoring what we feel like the body is telling us," says Miezín. "Someone might employ intuitive eating at a restaurant, and if you feel as though you're hungry and want to eat the hamburger, you eat the hamburger without feeling any judgment attached to that."

4. Intuitive eating doesn't mean all junk food, all the time

One of the primary principles of intuitive eating is honoring your health as well as what your body is craving. This means even if a young athlete is [constantly craving chips and soda](#), they try to prioritize their overall health over what the body 'wants' in the moment. [Maybe a serving of chips is a part of a snack or lunch](#), but a turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread is going to be more filling and satisfying—and healthy.

5. Intuitive eating is only part of the puzzle

According to Miezín, "Intuitive eating fits into the puzzle versus being the entire puzzle. Listening to your body like intuitive eating suggests is very important, but I truly don't think it's the entire solution or answer, especially with athletic populations." With athletic populations in particular, the idea of eating according to hunger isn't always the healthiest option. "We know that exercise, especially high volume or high intensity, can decrease appetite following exercise. So, for instance, if an athlete has practice after school, they may not be [hungry for dinner](#) when they get home, and may intuitively want to go to bed without eating. But we need to override that signal with our education and knowledge around good athletic nutrition. In that case, maybe a nutrient-dense [smoothie would be a good choice](#) since it will be easy to eat and digest, while providing the nourishment the athlete needs."

6. Intuitive eating can be challenging for teens on teams

Young athletes tend to do what their peers do, often without consciously being aware of it. Because of this, intuitive eating can be challenging for young athletes because it can go against the status quo, or a young athlete can convince themselves that skipping meals is fine because their teammates are. "Eating is about hunger, but it's also about so many other sensory aspects of foods: smelling things, seeing things, what our friends are doing, social settings, and emotions." says Miezín. "That's hard for young athletes to really comprehend. It takes a lot of focus and self-reflection to interpret all of those cues."

7. Eat intuitively, but balance it

"Ultimately, I encourage the idea of semi-structured, regular eating patterns, where meals are balanced and in sufficient portions," says Miezín. "Use intuitive eating to tweak these routines but have a general outline that's optimized for performance nutrition. We can use that structure of regular meals to help determine the causes of hunger. If you're eating on a regular schedule and one day you feel hungrier than usual, intuitive eating helps you recognize that and think about what could be causing the hunger, whether it's an emotion like boredom or a physical need like requiring a bit more protein at lunch, or even an extra snack because practice ran a bit longer than usual."

8. Be aware of disordered eating patterns

Unfortunately, while intuitive eating can be [used to help an athlete deal with disordered eating](#), it can also allow an athlete to hide disordered eating patterns under the guise of eating intuitively. "Intuitive eating can be really dangerous for a young athlete with disordered eating patterns because they may be actively trying to not eat enough. They may use the concept of intuitive eating to validate their behavior," says Miezín. In that case, respecting their 'intuitive' choices allows them to continue with dangerous behaviors.

9. Intuitive eating allows for some picky behaviors—but pick your priorities

Reading about intuitive eating as the parent of a picky eater might feel stressful: Does this mean stopping at McDonalds anytime your athlete would rather skip [your chicken stir fry](#)? "As in many areas of nutrition, it comes down to priorities," says Miezín. "It's not that intuitive eating is wrong in those times. But perhaps that's not really the priority of that situation. Here, the priority is nourishing your athlete, opening them up to different foods, enjoying time at the table

together." Explain that and offer other reasonable alternatives or tweaks to the meal instead, like adding certain toppings or switching the carbohydrates based on their needs.

Takeaway

Intuitive eating can offer a lot of positives for young athletes, from better understanding their own hunger cues to taking responsibility for truly nourishing their bodies to rejecting diet mentalities in favor of listening to their bodies. However, there are limitations to using intuitive eating for young athletes as a sole approach to making food choices. To best support fueling and nourishing for health and performance, leverage intuitive eating principles to enhance healthful eating practices and nutrition knowledge development.



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