

3 Sneaky Ways Sugar Slips into Your Athlete's Diet

By Michelle Wells, Guest Contributor



Sugar is everywhere.

And most of us have an unhealthy love affair with all things sweet.

Although everyone benefits from MONITORING sugar intake, it is especially important for young athletes – in order to support peak [performance](#).

An obvious effect of too much sugar is how it impacts your athlete's energy levels, on the field and during recovery. It provides a short-term boost that is quickly followed by a significant plunge – which is never helpful in practice or competition.

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In addition, high sugar is often the culprit for unhealthy weight gain. It adds empty calories and often takes the place of the very nutrients that kids need for healthy development.

Unfortunately, controlling sugar consumption is easier said than done. Even those vigilant parents who limit the number of sugary treats in the home, still have a tricky task ahead of them.

Here are 3 sneaky ways that sugar manages to slip into your athlete's daily nutrition.

1) Busy Schedules

Good nutrition doesn't happen by accident – especially in our fast-paced American culture. Instead, balanced nutritional choices require a purposeful effort.

Busy schedules definitely challenge a family's attempts to eat healthily.

Don't believe it?

Look at these scenarios that stem from a hectic schedule but inevitably LEAD to choices laden with sugar.

- Does your athlete skip a healthy breakfast because she "runs" out of time, only to eat a donut later?
- Does a lack of food prep cause your kids to be snacking on empty sugar-filled calories?
- Are practices and games getting in the way of traditional family dinners – resulting in more frozen pizzas or last-minute drive-thru orders?
- Has your busy athlete ever skipped a meal only to overeat late at night because they were "starving?"
- Does a chaotic school and sports schedule cause your child to stress-eat junk food?

The Remedy

Changing a family's lifestyle takes time and it would be overwhelming to try to fix ALL the bad habits that have resulted from busy schedules.

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Choose one area to focus on that your family/athlete needs to change. Instead of going for a complete overhaul, find one doable step, or “tweak” your existing routines and work to bring about a small but positive adjustment.

For example, if family meals have become nonexistent you might try adding one dinner and one family breakfast each week that the whole family attends.

2) Hidden Sugars and Processed Foods

We all fall victim to multi-million-dollar marketing.

We buy the sports bars, the “healthy” granola, Greek yogurt, protein smoothies, fat-free ice cream, and many varieties of trail mix.

Unfortunately, along with the healthy ingredients in these items, there is also a healthy dose of hidden sugars.

Processed foods in particular are likely to have added sugars and chemical additives that are not good for your athlete.

If you spend a couple of days looking at the grams of sugar per serving on the items your athlete eats regularly you may be surprised by how quickly it can add up.



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The Remedy

Opt for whole unprocessed foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, beans and unrefined grains.

Check labels and compare with different brands. You may find a significant difference in the sugar content of two very similar items. This may especially be true with things like yogurt, cereals, and crackers.

3) Sports Drinks

Go to any sports field on a Saturday morning and you will see 8-year olds guzzling down Gatorade or Powerade to get through a 45-minute soccer game.

Again, thanks in large part to marketing, we have come to believe that these replacement fluids are the best way to stay hydrated. But with 21 grams of sugar in one 12 oz bottle and a whopping 56 grams in a 32 oz bottle it is no wonder that we have kids addicted to sugar.

[Research](#) into the use of sports drinks has found that our bodies really only need water for MOST sporting events.

Endurance athletes working intensely for 90 plus minutes are the only ones who need to consider replenishing with something more than good old H₂O.

It is also important to mention that other juice drinks are also high in sugar and are not nearly as beneficial to your athlete as the actual fruit itself.

The Remedy

If your child is used to drinking a sports drink and is reluctant to switch to water you could start by diluting their drink until you are slowly able to wean them off the sugary option.

There are 2 times when it makes sense to include Gatorade:

- If they are involved in an endurance event that goes over 90 minutes – like a triathlon or marathon.
- If the event is taking place in temperatures that are 95 degrees or higher.

Other than that, your child should be hydrating with water.

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Final Thoughts

Optimizing health and sports performance goes hand-in-hand. And it doesn't happen overnight.

The best way to teach your athlete is to model good nutritional choices yourself and to make it a family effort. Remember to:

- Be aware of how your lifestyle influences the ability to make good choices.
- Be on the lookout for hidden sugars.
- Hydrate with H2O and leave the sports drinks for the rare treat.

Michelle Wells is a wife to one and a mom to six, with 20 plus years of experience at both. With a love for being active in sports she took her passion for competitive training to the world of triathlons where she rocked the elite age group level for several years. In an effort to share her enthusiasm for a balanced and healthy life she inspires others through personal training and freelance writing. <https://www.creativescollectivemarketing.com/>