

The Athlete's Kitchen

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## Fueling on a Budget

“When we travel as a team, we eat at fast food places because they fit with our small budget. What's the best fast food for athletes...?”

“After my workout, the last thing I want to do is cook dinner. Where can I buy affordable but healthy sports meals...?”

A limited food budget creates a fueling challenge for many athletes, including college teams traveling to games, students responsible for their own meals, parents of active kids, and semi-pro players hoping to get to the next level. The name of the fueling game is: *How can you buy enough healthy calories with the least amount of money?* These practical tips can help optimize a low-budget sports diet.

### **1. Encourage the team bus (or your car) to stop at a large supermarket.**

Everyone can find something they like: vegetarians, gluten-free eaters, picky eaters who want to lose weight, and chowhounds who need lots of calories. By walking around the inside perimeter of the store, you will find the makings for a balanced meal—even hot meals, if desired. Shop for:

**Fresh fruit:** Banana, apple, pear, grapes. Buy what's on sale.

**Fresh veggies:** While you can easily create a colorful salad at the salad bar area, it might be a bit pricey. The simpler option is to simply buy: a green or red pepper (eat it whole, as you might eat an apple), a bag of baby carrots (along with a container of hummus), or a container of cherry tomatoes. Enjoy the whole thing; a hefty dose of veggies on one day can help compensate for another day when you have none.

(To clean the fresh produce, plan ahead. Pack extra water to rinse the produce before getting on the bus. Or nicely ask an employee in the store's produce area if he or she could help you by giving the fresh produce a quick rinse.)

**Protein:** Buy a quarter-pound of deli turkey, roast beef, or ham along with a few whole wheat rolls to make sandwiches. Small or large tubs of cottage cheese, tuna packets, and peanut butter are other popular protein options. Share a rotisserie chicken with friends (or save the leftovers if you can refrigerate them within an hour.)

**Grains and other carbs:** Pita, wraps, baked chips, whole-grain crackers and pretzels are carb-based options that refuel your muscles. Look for freshly baked whole-wheat rolls, hearty

bread, and whole-grain bagels. You might be able to find a plastic knife at the salad bar so you can slice the rolls to make a nice sandwich with deli meat and lowfat cheese. Pop a few cherry tomatoes between bites, and you'll have a balanced meal with all 4 foods groups: 1) lean meats/beans/nuts, 2) lowfat dairy or calcium-alternative, 3) fruit/vegetable, 4) grain.

**Calcium-rich foods:** You can easily buy a small or large tub of lowfat yogurt, a single milk chug—or even a whole a quart of chocolate milk if you are really hungry. For athletes who are dairy-free, soymilk is a fine alternative. Pick up some pre-sliced lowfat cheese in the dairy or deli area. (Note: Hard cheese, such as cheddar, is lactose-free and comes in convenient single portions.) Add an apple and whole grain crackers—voila, a balanced sports meal! While it may not be the hot meal your mom had in mind, it will do the job of contributing needed nutrients to refuel from the day's event, fuel-up for tomorrow, and invest in future good health.

**Beverages:** You can save a lot of money (plus save space in landfills) by packing your own gallon jug of water. To spend money on plain water (void of calories, carbs, and vitamins) seems wasteful when tap water is free. Instead buy 100% juice (orange, grape, carrot, V-8) to boost your fruit/veggie intake and simultaneously boost your immune system with anti-inflammatory phytochemicals. Plus, 100% juice is a strong source of carbohydrate to refuel depleted muscles, as well as fluid to replace sweat losses. Chocolate milk is another winning beverage, with protein to build and repair exhausted muscles, as well as carbs to refuel them.

If the team bus (or your car) is pulling into a fast food restaurant, at least choose one that will support the nutritional needs of athletes. Here are a few suggestions:

- At Taco Bell, you can get the most amount of healthy calories for a bargain price when you order their bean burrito. Two bean burritos cost only \$2.20 and provide 750 (mostly quality) calories.
- At a burger place, choose a grilled chicken sandwich (no fries). It will be more expensive and offer fewer calories than a burger, so plan to supplement the sandwich with some Fig Newtons, pretzels or raisins that you pre-packed from home.
- At a pizza place, order the cheese pizza, preferably with veggie toppings like mushroom, pepper, and/or onion. Nix the pepperoni, sausage and other greasy meat options, as well as the double cheese. You'd end up fat-loading with that type of pizza. It would fill your stomach but leave your muscles poorly fueled. Remember: muscles need carbs (such as *thick* pizza crust) to replenish glycogen stores.
- Be cautious of super salads. While they have a seemingly healthy glow, they can be unfriendly for many sports diets, particularly if you are weight-conscious. Making a substantial salad with not only colorful veggies but also grated cheese, chopped egg, diced chicken, slivered almonds, pumpkin seeds, and olives offers you a hefty dose of calories, but not enough grains/carbs to



refuel your muscles. Adding even a little bit of dressing to a big salad often adds 400 or more calories. A sandwich can have fewer calories....

- Hungry athletes who need lots of inexpensive calories can do well by packing sandwiches made with peanut butter & jelly (or PB & jam, honey, raisins, banana, pickles or even cottage cheese—whatever tastes good to you). Peanut butter is versatile and a great sports food because it offers protein, B-vitamins, and good fats that knock down inflammation. It's inexpensive, travels well without refrigeration, is good for you, and tastes great! It's even good for dieters because it keeps you feeling fed, and curbs the urge to eat cookies. For the \$2 needed to slap together a hefty 600-calorie PB&J (made with 2 slices Pepperidge Farm Bread, 3 Tbsp. Teddie all-natural peanut butter, and 2 Tbsp. Welch's grape jelly), you couldn't even buy a Muscle Milk (\$3.69 for 230 calories). Shop wisely and fuel well!

Boston-area sports nutritionist Nancy Clark MS RD counsels both casual and competitive athletes at her private practice in Newton (617-795-1875). Her *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* and her food guides for runners, cyclists and soccer players are available at [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com). For online education, visit [www.sportsnutritionworkshop.com](http://www.sportsnutritionworkshop.com) and [www.NutritionSportsExerciseCEUS.com](http://www.NutritionSportsExerciseCEUS.com).