



Feeding active kids

A guide for parents,
coaches and
team managers

The junior gymnast or dancer

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“Encourage your junior gymnast or dancer to establish a healthy relationship with food from an early age. It is important that they learn to eat and drink well to achieve their best performance and feel great”

This booklet offers guidance for meeting the nutritional needs of children aged 5-11 who participate in gymnastics or dance.

Parents and coaches frequently ask me "What are the best foods and drinks for kids to have while being active, especially at sports carnivals?" Just as often, in conversations between parents at events, I hear quite different opinions being expressed about what is good and bad practice in watering and feeding our sports stars of tomorrow. Obviously many people are seeking answers to some simple but important questions.

So it was very pleasing when the Canned Food Information Service asked me exactly the same sorts of questions because they wanted to know which of their products were appropriate for these active kids before, during and after sport and especially on carnival days.

To answer these questions, we developed this booklet and the accompanying cookbook *Fast Food for Active Families*. I developed most of the recipes for the cookbook and tested them on our three "guinea pigs" and their multitude of friends, who gather round the kitchen bench on the weekends after sport.

As the mother of three children aged 7 to 12 years (including a junior gymnast) who are physically very active, this is a subject dear to my heart. I know how hard it is to juggle the demands of daily living whilst trying to maximise the family health and energy levels so that everyone performs at their best.

As a Sports Dietitian, I know that elite athletes are well catered for in terms of professional advice on diet and training. But the parents of younger children, particularly in their first few years of competition, often have to rely on the advice of well-meaning volunteer coaches. And sometimes that advice can be misleading or incomplete.

I am really pleased to have the opportunity to provide a service that fills this important gap and complements the work of other sports dietitians working with Australian athletes. The earlier healthy habits are established the better.

I'd like to offer particular thanks to my colleagues, Sports Dietitians **Karen Inge** and **Helen O'Connor**, for their support and professional review of this publication.

Also, thanks to my editorial team: Kerry Burkitt, Trish Lear and Grahame Horsfield.



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*Ruth Logan with her three sporty kids
(photography by Tony Coonan)*

GETTING READY..

There are several nutrition concerns requiring particular attention for children participating in gymnastics and dance

These include:

- optimising their growth and development year round
- learning to recognise the nutrient density or “goodness” of food versus its “energy density” or kilojoule content
- including adequate iron and calcium in their daily diet
- including adequate carbohydrate and protein and *suitable* fat in their diet
- providing quick healthy low fat meals and snacks to maintain energy levels
- ensuring sufficient liquid intake
- being aware of possible weight and body image issues in your child.

Optimising growth and development

It is important for the junior gymnast or dancer to eat well every day – not just on competition days or before a performance, and to develop healthy strategies for lifetime weight management.

Active children need constant refuelling and cooling. Their nutrition needs are of great importance to their overall health, growth and development as well as to their sporting performance.

The junior athlete will perform better, for longer and recover quicker from training and competition when well nourished. The junior gymnast or dancer who is not getting enough total energy may become tired, irritable and lethargic, and may even struggle to maintain interest and enjoyment in physical activity.

Children of this age involved in gymnastics and dance can be performing at levels ranging from recreational to the elite. As their level of achievement increases, particular nutrition issues become more important.

The difference between the dietary needs of male and female participants also requires consideration. The junior male gymnast or dancer will need greater quantities of food to achieve normal growth and development than the same age female.

Choose nutrient dense rather than energy dense, or high kilojoule, food

It is quite surprising how little extra food some young gymnasts and dancers require for their sport. Consequently the quantity of food eaten may not be as large as might be expected. It is important however they eat top quality foods to ensure optimal nutrient intake. It is sometimes difficult to know how much is enough for active kids. Be guided by their appetite and not by how long they have been active. These sports are quite energy efficient and don't greatly increase the child's need for fuel from food over and above that needed for normal growth and development.

It may be necessary to encourage them – especially the underweight child – to eat something at times when they feel too tired or busy to bother. But don't panic if their appetite sometimes seems less than usual – that's normal! Healthy snacks are useful at times like this.

Iron and calcium are nutrients especially important for young female athletes

Iron

This mineral is responsible for carrying oxygen around the body and is essential for maximising energy levels in active children and adults. Low iron levels can cause tiredness and will affect performance at training and during competition.

The best sources of dietary iron include lean red meats, liver and kidney. You should try to include a small amount of lean red meat in their diet at least 3-4 times weekly.

Other sources of iron are green leafy vegetables, legumes such as lentils and baked beans, eggs and breakfast cereals. It is more difficult for the body to absorb the iron from these sources, so encourage children to eat complementary foods that supply Vitamin C. Adding Vitamin C increases the body's ability to absorb the iron from non-meat sources. For example, put strawberries on the cereal or offer a glass of orange juice with the baked beans.

Calcium

Calcium is the mineral responsible for healthy growth and development of bones. It also helps to keep the muscles working properly. A lack of calcium can lead to weak bones and increased risk of fractures in later life.

Active children should be encouraged to consume at least 2-3 serves of dairy foods or fortified soy alternatives each day. Examples of one serve include: 1 cup of reduced fat milk; 1 tub of yogurt; 2 slices of reduced fat cheese; 1 cup of a calcium enriched soy beverage.

Other good sources of calcium include canned fish with edible bones, green leafy vegetables, nuts and seeds. But kids would need to eat quite large amounts of any of these choices to obtain a sufficient intake.

The importance of carbohydrates

Ensure the young gymnast or dancer has opportunities to eat foods rich in carbohydrate such as bread and other cereal products, fruit, starchy vegetables and calcium rich dairy foods or soy alternatives. These *Getting Ready Foods* (listed below) need to be eaten at frequent intervals each day as they provide much of the fuel needed to keep kids active and happy. Carbohydrates keep blood sugar levels constant, aid concentration during the day and help to keep them alert at school. Because the body can only store a limited amount of carbohydrate it is important to have at least one of these foods at every meal or snack to top up supplies.

Encourage healthy dental hygiene to minimise tooth decay when consuming sweet carbs.

Getting Ready Foods

Cereals

Breakfast cereals; rolled oats and other grains served hot or cold;
Bread & bread rolls; pita, Turkish and mountain breads; tortillas, tacos, lavash; crackers & crisp breads; rice cakes; corn thins; rice; pasta (including canned spaghetti); noodles; couscous

Dairy & soy foods

Plain & flavoured milks; yogurt; milk desserts
Calcium enriched soy alternatives

Fruit

All fresh, canned or dried fruits; fruit bars; fruit fingers; fruit juices

Vegetables & legumes (pulses)

Potato, sweet corn, sweet potato, peas, beetroot, pumpkin, baked beans, lentils, chick peas, soy beans, bean mixes

Extras - sweet snacks

Low fat cereal/muesli bars; muffins; cake; biscuits; fruit buns, fruit loaf, fruit scones; pikelets, pancakes, waffles; jelly confectionery, jelly, jellied fruits; sports drinks, cordial



Grow Foods

Meat, seafood and eggs

Beef, veal, lamb, pork, turkey, chicken
Fish - fresh, canned or frozen; other seafood
Eggs

Dairy and soy foods

Milk, cheese and yogurt
Calcium enriched soy products - milk, yogurt
Tofu

Legumes, nuts and seeds

Baked beans; meat analogues (vegetarian foods); seed beans; nuts such as almonds and cashews; peanuts and peanut butter; seeds like pumpkin and sunflower

The importance of protein

As well as eating and enjoying a wide variety of foods, it is important to make sure that junior athletes have enough protein in their diet. Encourage them to include the *Grow Foods* listed above.

It is important that active children learn to eat according to their appetite – ensuring they eat enough but not too much, while remembering they often have great variance in their appetite from day to day due to factors such as activity, tiredness and growth.

Where dietary fat fits into a healthy diet

All children require a small amount of fat (3-4 teaspoons) in their daily food intake for normal growth and development. It is recommended that all Australians, including children, limit their intake of saturated fats (mainly animal fats). Children, however, need to include plenty of the healthier unsaturated fats found in foods like fish, nuts, seeds and avocados.

Children under the age of five need to be eating full cream dairy foods to meet their nutritional and energy needs. However, children over five years of age may be offered reduced fat dairy products.

The importance of snacks for the young gymnast and dancer

At the elite level, many hours of training will be required which can prove exhausting. Some clubs provide a microwave facility to allow reheating of meals to be eaten in the car on the way home. This saves valuable time and prevents the problem of tiredness inhibiting food intake. If a microwave is not available you

will need to take snacks that can be eaten cold. Encourage “active” recovery between practice sessions, performances and during competition by providing foods and drinks containing plenty of carbohydrate. Often fluids are more acceptable to children at this time with the best choices being sports drink, cordial, fruit juice and flavoured milk.

Foods containing a small amount of protein with the carbohydrate are also great – try snack packs of canned fruit, fruit purees with yogurt, baked beans or spaghetti with cheese on toast, cereal bars or fruit bars with a milk drink.

‘Treat’ foods do have a role to play in a healthy diet but encourage children to recognise treats as occasional, not every day. Discourage excess indulgences by explaining to kids that too much of anything can create problems and will certainly affect their ability to perform to their best.

Before and after activity is a great time to offer an occasional “sweet treat” to top up energy levels. These include sports drinks, cordials, jelly and jelly confectionery.



Smart Snacks

Bread, crumpets or English muffins with jam

Fresh fruit or a snack pack of canned fruit

Sandwich with low fat cheese, honey or jam

Vegetable pieces with low fat dip

Breakfast cereal with low fat milk

Low fat yogurt

Low fat cereal/fruit bars

Pita chips, pretzels or crackers

Fruit bun or raisin toast with jam

Corn & rice crackers or corn thins

Scone, pikelet, pancake with syrup

Low fat smoothie with fruit (fresh or canned)

Low fat/quick cook noodles

Low fat milkshakes

Canned spaghetti or baked beans

Water with cordial for flavour

Home made popcorn

Fruit juice

Ensuring your child is drinking enough fluids

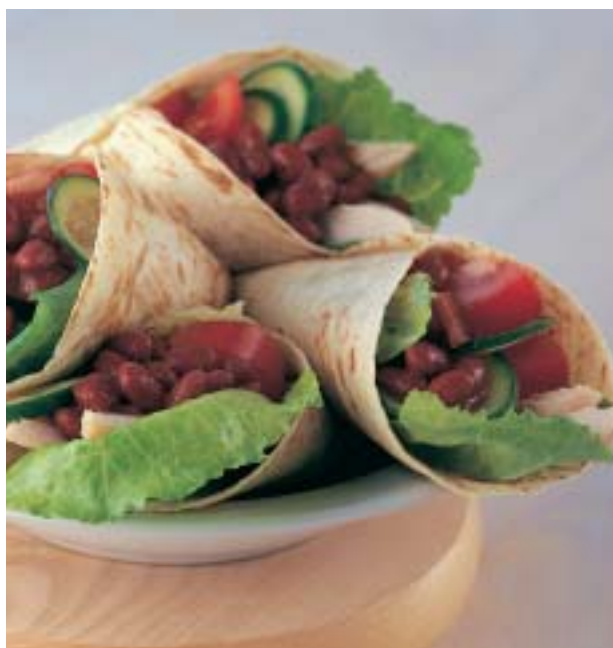
Managing liquid intake is just as important as their food intake. Getting these young people into the habit of taking regular fluids is extremely important. Dehydration is a common problem within this group of junior athletes and it is often not recognised.

Remind children to keep up their fluid intake by drinking “mouthfuls often” during events, immediately after each period of activity as well as during the day at school or home. Water is the preferred drink but during activity a flavoured sports drink containing small amounts of sugar and electrolytes may encourage greater intake and help keep them performing at their best.

Managing weight and body image issues in your young gymnast or dancer

There are always going to be some gymnasts and dancers who are more prone to problems with weight control while there will also be the naturally tiny participant who struggles to eat enough food and requires constant encouragement with food and fluid intake to maintain adequate energy for performance.

It is important that junior gymnasts and dancers develop healthy attitudes to food and fluids from an early age in the hope of avoiding the “dieting mentality” which so often becomes associated with weight control sports and can predispose them to more serious eating disorders in later years.



Junior gymnasts and dancers may become concerned about their body weight due to changes related to growth phases. Children grow in “spurts” – usually going out first followed by an upward growth phase. During this ‘out’ phase, children often become very aware of their body shape and dislike the associated feeling or appearance of fatness. Coaches and parents need to be aware of their sensitivity to weight related comments and always encourage healthy food choices without severe restriction of quantity.

Deprivation of food intake can lead to nutritional insufficiency, poor growth and long term problems with disordered eating habits. A major concern relates to the potential for poor bone development in these young children and associated stunted growth. There is also the real possibility of nutritional deficiencies such as iron deficiency anaemia.

For those junior gymnasts or dancers wanting to gain weight or strength the advice is quite simple - eat larger quantities of nutritious foods, and healthy snacks like nuts and dried fruit, and enjoy more nourishing drinks to provide the extra energy required to build muscle.



If your child is overweight, a healthy diet and activity plan can help

Management of overweight children often requires expert help from your doctor or a dietitian. Avoid strict dieting or rapid weight loss. Parents can help by reducing the child’s overall energy intake and encouraging more physical activity. Choose low fat foods for meals and snacks. Avoid the use of fatty, salty take-away and convenience foods and replace high sugar snacks and drinks with water and more nutritious choices like fruit.

Encourage children to become actively involved with the purchase and preparation of healthy meals and snacks early in life. The whole family may need to get organised for healthy eating – this can offer a great opportunity to change everyone’s food and fluid intake habits for the better. Remember though, that the age and activity level of family members will determine their required quantities.

If you are concerned about your junior gymnast or dancer becoming fanatical or overly preoccupied about their food choices, avoiding family meals, skipping meals or snacks during the day, excluding certain foods or refusing to eat fat or meat for example, seek professional help quickly. Your general practitioner is a good place to start. If an eating disorder is developing, early intervention will make treatment easier and produce better long term outcomes.



GETTING SET...

The week before a competition

During the week leading up to a major gymnastics or dance competition junior athletes will often do less hours of training – ‘tapering’ – but they should continue eating their usual diet. Often athletes feel pressured to eat more in preparation for competition. This is unnecessary and could lead to weight gain while less active.

The night before a big sporting event is the time to eat plenty of carbohydrate rich foods and drink extra fluids to ensure a good state of hydration. Often this happens on a Friday night

when busy families are pushed for time and spare energy.

If so, keep the food simple and use convenient canned and frozen foods and packaged foods like noodles, pasta and rice to supplement fresh products to produce healthy fitness foods, fast.

Thinking ahead and having foods pre-prepared will ease the pressure and help the family achieve a great performance all round. This is the time for carbohydrates, some protein foods and plenty of nourishing drinks.

You’ll find many family favourites are ideal including some of the recipes from the cookbook *Fast Food for Active Families*. If you don’t have this cookbook you can call 1800 033 872 during office hours to obtain a copy.

Recipes included from our cookbook are listed below in *italics*.

Healthy Family Fast Food

Family main meal ideas

Logan’s Lasagne - rich with beef, pork or chicken, tomatoes, frozen spinach & cheese

Performance Pasta - your favourite pasta shape with bacon, vegetables and cheese

Mexi Balls - beef, rice and tasty seasoning turned into yummy meatballs

Sweet Lamb Curry - luscious lamb and vegetables in a rich but mild curry sauce

Mince in Minutes Tacos - use our quick mince recipe to turn into tasty tacos

Hunger Buster Burgers - juicy quick steaks with beetroot, pineapple and cheese in a roll

Winter Casserole - a classic but quick rich beef casserole with bacon, tomatoes and mushrooms

Chicken Wraps - tortillas filled with roast chicken, canned beans, salad and light sour cream

Hearty Minestrone - a meal in a bowl rich with vegetables, beans and rice

Pinwheels - savoury spiral buns filled with tasty mince, herbs and cheese

Pizza Power - uses a prepared base topped with roast chicken, ham, pineapple and cheese

Spinach, Feta and Corn Pie - a delicious ‘loaf’ to serve with salsa or your choice of sauce

Pineapple Chicken Stirfry - chicken with fruit and vegetables in a spicy but sweet sauce

Desserts and ‘extras’

Apple crunch

Tropical Rice Pudding

Aussie Peach Dream

Fruit Salad Anzac Slice

Pancakes or waffles

Creamed rice with canned fruit

Canned fruit with custard or ice cream

Fresh rolls, a salad or a fruit platter

Drinks

Speedy shake

Fruit Spider

Peach & Mango Smoothie

Milk drinks

Fruit juices and cordials

On the day

Select a combination from the following foods to make a nutritious breakfast

- cereal with low fat milk and/or yogurt
- toast or pancakes or muffins
- spaghetti or baked beans
- eggs; low fat cheese
- juice or fruit.

Breakfast should be eaten at least two hours before activity commences to keep your child feeling satisfied and well fuelled. But if your child gets hungry again up to one hour before starting exercise, allow a small low-fat snack.

If you have to travel long distances or need to make an early start to get to a carnival, pack some eat-on-the-run foods including flavoured milk drinks; cereal bars; bread rolls with spread; juice; fruit bars; canned or fresh fruit or a fruit bun. Or use a prepared liquid meal to allow your gymnast or dancer to eat at a more suitable time.

The best foods to serve at breakfast are those your children are used to eating and are quick and easy to prepare and eat – *minimise fuss*.

Low fibre foods, like nourishing drinks, could be best for the pre-performance meal if your child gets an upset tummy due to “nerves”



before performing or competing. Otherwise foods that are rich sources of carbohydrate, yet low in fat, are best eaten prior to activity. For dancers performing in the evening, suitable pre-performance meals could be selected from the list of *Healthy Family Fast Food* on page 9. The main meal should be eaten about 2-4 hours prior to the start of the performance to allow time for digestion and emptying of food from the stomach.

Remember to encourage your children to drink fluids at this time. The best drinks are low fat milk, juice, sports drinks and plenty of water. One to two cups should be enough.

Breakfast Ideas

Cereal with fat reduced milk , fruit and yogurt plus glass of juice

Toast with a scrape of butter or margarine, fat reduced cheese and tomato with a glass of milk

Spaghetti on toast with a fruit milkshake

Scrambled egg with cheese and tomato, toast and a glass of juice

Banana and peanut butter on toast with a flavoured milk drink

Baked beans with fat reduced grated cheese on toast with fruit and a glass of milk

Canned spaghetti on toast, yogurt and a glass of fruit juice

Canned fruit with yogurt; toast and spread with a glass of milk

Fruit or English muffins with a scrape of spread and honey or jam and a fruit smoothie

Pancakes with honey and a glass of milk

Crumpets with honey, a tub of yogurt and a glass of flavoured milk or juice

GO!

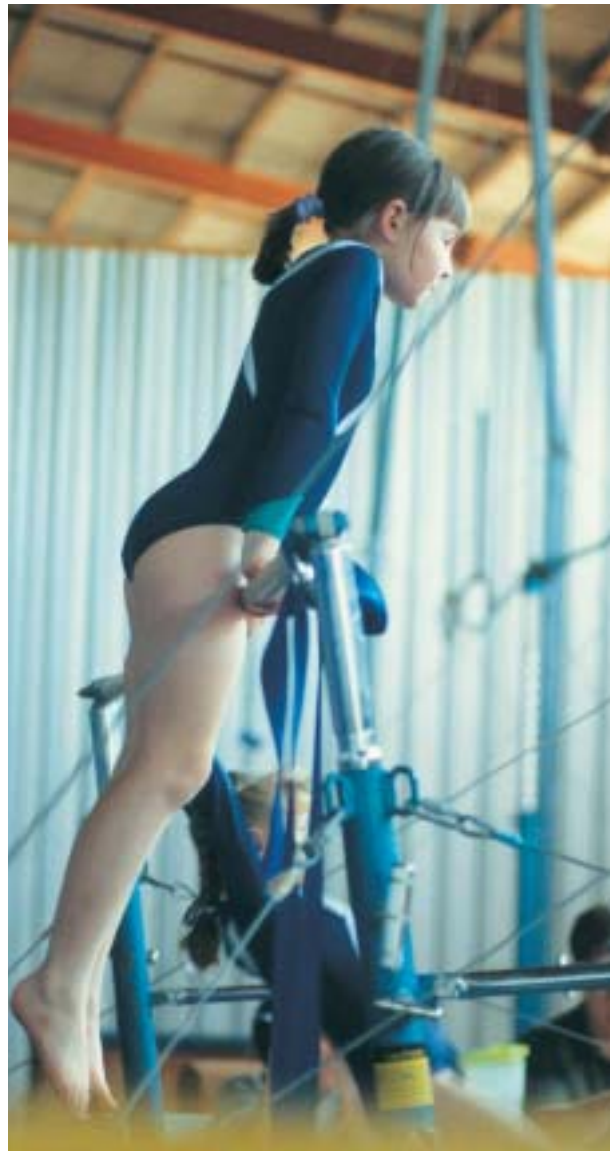
At the event

Don't rely on the canteen or nearby shops to supply foods and drinks during competitions, as healthy choices are not always available.

Be prepared by packing your own supplies of food and drinks in a cooler bag. Always pack two drink bottles per child – one for water and the other with sports drink. Also take a top up supply of cooled water, juice poppers and flavoured fluids if it will be a long day.

Between events on competition days a snack containing 40 - 50 g of carbohydrate will help boost energy levels and prevent hunger.

Each of these *Energy Boosters* provides approximately 50 g of carbohydrate. It's always a good idea to encourage some food with fluids, if time permits, between performances.



Energy Boosters

Flavoured milk or a liquid meal tetrapak (e.g.Sustagen)

1 bottle (600 mL) sports drink or prepared sports cordial

A snack pack of canned fruit with a juice popper

50 g packet of jelly confectionery with water

Jam or honey sandwich with a juice popper

1 piece of fruit or 1 packet sultanas with 300 mL sports cordial

Bread roll with banana and water

1 low fat cereal bar with a juice popper or flavoured milk

1 fruit bun with a juice popper

2 large pikelets with jam or honey plus a snack pack canned fruit

Fruit muffin with a juice popper or water

Fluid intake on the day

In the half hour prior to starting activity, aim to get your child to drink about 1/2 -1 cup of water or sports drink.

Cool fluids need to be made available at frequent intervals during activity. Aim for an intake of at least 1/2 cup every 20-30 minutes depending on level of exertion and environmental conditions. This equates to a couple of “good mouthfuls”. Often junior gymnasts will spend time waiting for their turn to perform and therefore not need fluids as frequently as when they are actively involved. These children will however work hard during a day of competition and will need to top up regularly with food and fluids to keep performing at the best.

Some children will obviously need more fluids than others so keep a check on how your child is feeling. If they are starting to look or feel hot, push the fluids a little more.

During the warmer months children will need to be reminded to drink more frequently as the venue could get quite hot which will increase their fluid losses. As winter creeps in, their fluid losses will lessen but it is even more important to remind them to drink, as they often won't feel thirsty despite being dehydrated.

Immediately after their performance, encourage kids to drink the rest of their bottle (at least 500 mL). Sports drinks and water are best during and after long sessions of activity and are especially important during a competition where children may be active over a long period of time.

Sports drinks and sports cordials have been proven to be useful in recovery after exercise as they assist fluid and electrolyte replacement. Also, it has been shown that children will drink more if the fluid is flavoured – vary the flavours to avoid taste fatigue.

After the event

Recovery after each day's game or training session is essential to maintain your child's best performance – especially over consecutive days at a major carnival.

Recovery snacks and fluids should be

- started within 30 minutes of finishing exercise
- high in carbohydrate with a little protein
- quick and easy to prepare and eat
- available at the venue if it takes a long time to get home.

Junior gymnasts or dancers performing on cold, bleak winter mornings will often look for something warm to eat when they finish. Some winter-warming nourishing snack ideas can be found on the next page.



Winter Warmers

Savoury jaffles with a milkshake

A serve of canned soup with toast and a glass of milk

Pancakes with syrup and warmed flavoured milk

A quick pasta snack with juice

Crumpets with 'lite' cheese or honey and juice

Low fat minute noodles with a hot milk drink

A toasted sandwich with juice

Or try these winter warmers from our cookbook *Fast Food for Active Families*.

Hearty Minestrone - vegetables, nourishing beans & rice served with crusty bread and a glass of juice

Pinwheels - spirals filled with tasty mince and cheese to enjoy with canned tomato soup

Mince Muffins - tasty, beefy mini muffins with a hot milk drink

Mexi Balls - meaty mouthfuls with just enough spices for kids with a banana smoothie

The night after a big day of competition

Coping with tired, hungry children at the end of a long day of sport can be challenging for any parent. The temptation to line up at a fast food outlet can be great and pressure from the children can make it even harder to resist.

Of course, takeaway foods can be enjoyed as an occasional treat but generally try to limit them to special occasions rather than every weekend!

You may not be in the habit of having a meal ready at home but with the help of some ideas from the cookbook and remembering to use "convenience foods" from the supermarket, it will be possible! It will also save the family time and money and certainly improve the nutritional value of the meal.

One solution is to have food already prepared in the fridge or freezer – only needing reheating while showers happen.

Have a selection of fresh, canned, packaged and frozen foods on hand to prepare home cooked "Fast Food". You will find the following quick and easy to prepare recipes in our cookbook *Fast Food for Active Families* as well as some suitable to prepare in advance for a quick reheat when you get home.



Quickly prepared dishes

Mince in Minutes
Tuna Temptation
Hunger Buster Burgers
Chicken Wraps
Pineapple Chicken Stirfry
Tropical Rice Delight
Gran's Pineapple Sago

Ideal for reheating

Logan's Lasagne
Winter Casserole
Sweet Lamb Curry
Potato Power
Hearty Minestrone
Pinwheels

HOT TIPS TO STAY COOL

How to avoid overheating and ensure adequate fluid intake

Running out of fuel is often not the main problem for gymnasts or dancers, but getting overheated is a very real possibility for active kids and will impair their performance

- Children should always have their own water bottle on hand or in the team drink crate, to sip from during the game and at breaks in play.
- Keep fluids cool – not a problem in winter - and have a mix of water and flavoured drinks such as sports drink, or sports cordial, to encourage greater intake during and after activity.
- Fluid loss will vary from game to game depending on a child's involvement in the action and the environmental conditions. Be prepared to compensate for extra losses if your child is overheating.
- Remind children not to wait until they are thirsty before they start to drink! By then they will already be starting to dehydrate and possibly overheating.
- Discourage your gymnasts or dancers from using carbonated drinks before, during and immediately after exercise as they can upset the stomach and reduce their desire to drink. (Bloating can be a problem and means they will get too full before they drink a sufficient volume.)
- It is not suitable for active children to be using high caffeine drinks before, during or after sport. Discourage intake of tea, coffee, cola drinks and the new age 'energy' drinks that contain large amounts of caffeine. These are definitely not recommended for junior athletes.
- Monitor drinks hygiene. Encourage your child to adopt healthy habits when drinking from a shared bottle. It is preferred that kids get into the habit of taking their own bottle. But if they forget, their lips should not touch any part of a shared bottle. Teach them how

to squirt or use a chin sipper bottle to get the water into their mouth.

- Sports drinks are an excellent source of energy and fluid during and after activity. But encourage your gymnasts or dancers to drink flavoured fluids through a straw to direct the fluid to the back and avoid swishing round the mouth.



WARNING SIGNS FOR DEHYDRATION

Know the warning signs for dehydration. If a child shows any of the following signs it would be best for them to take some time out to rest and take in fluids

- dizziness and light-headedness
- muscle cramps
- nausea and headache.

After games you will know if your child has not drunk enough if any of these signs are noticed

- dark urine and infrequent urination
- dry mouth and throat
- a feeling of extreme heat which remains after a cool down time.

