



## Creating a Positive Performance Culture

As a coach you play a key role in creating a safe and supportive environment for your athlete, squad or team. Language and commentary around nutrition, body composition and movement can influence the actions of your athlete(s) impacting on their health and performance.

We encourage you and or your athletes to work closely with an [Accredited Sports Dietitian](#), who can provide individualised and purposeful recommendations, to safely guide your athlete, **IF** a nutritional intervention is indicated to support any body composition changes that is a critical performance or success factor (e.g. to gain muscle, optimise lean muscle composition or reduce total mass for athletes who need to 'make weight' for their sport). In any of these circumstances, **every opportunity to minimise harm and adverse risk** to your athlete's health, safety as well as reduce the risk of disordered eating or eating disorders should be made.

### How can you be an awesome role model?

Encourage and promote the role of nutrition as part of their performance toolkit – emphasise its beneficial role in health and mood, supporting adequate energy, consistent periods of training and recovery, performance, concentration, and skill execution (etc.)

- Recognise the role of food and eating for enjoyment and pleasure in addition to its role in performance.
- Redirect any specific nutrition questions from athletes to be discussed with their sports dietitian and if not already, encourage them to find a great sports dietitian to have in their corner, like their physio, masseuse or psychologist!
- If body composition is being discussed, ensure any goals or objectives are always and only related back to potential performance benefits/gains, as opposed to looking "more fit or for aesthetic reasons" – and refer to an [Accredited Sports Dietitian](#).

- Always maintain focus and direct conversation to improving additional performance success factors that are unrelated to 'weight/size and don't immediately associate improved performance with composition changes.'
- Don't engage in making fun about **any athlete's** (this includes diversity across age, gender, level and ability) weight, shape, body composition or dietary intake (no matter how subtle, light, or "in good fun" it seems) – **be a leader and champion a thriving culture.**

### What is important for coaches to understand?

- Bodies change across the lifespan as do subsequent nutritional requirements. A young athlete's body changes through puberty and any attempts to control/limit this critical stage of growth and development including the use of supplements, can be significantly more harmful than helpful, in the short term and long term.
- All athletes and particularly young athletes need to feel supported, not to feel their body is being criticised/judged/shamed, told they are lazy, not training hard enough or enduring comparisons to other athletes.
- For a variety of reasons, athletes may be more predisposed to a challenging relationship with food or their body; even changes to their external environment, including recent periods of lockdown and isolation, can [trigger a change](#) in eating behaviours, body image and self-esteem. This can increase the risk of disordered eating or eating disorders, as well as low energy availability and relative energy deficiency in sport.
- All athletes of varying body size and shape, gender and ability appear to have a higher prevalence of developing disordered eating and or [eating disorders](#) than non-athletes. For those individuals involved in gravitational, aesthetics or weight class sports the risk is higher. Early detection and



intervention can decrease the risk of serious health and performance consequences.

### Listen, Recognise and Act - RED flags!

Listening to your athlete and monitoring their use of any negative language or self – critical dialogue around their food or body, or other ‘compensatory behaviours’ is important.

- “I am feeling ... fat / thick / sloppy / pudgy / chubby / puffy / chunky”
- “I was really bad on the weekend/last night/yesterday, I ate so much”
- “I’ve heard these foods increase fat tissue, so I’ve being really good/clean and cutting out ....”
- “I need to look buff and weigh as much as that senior player”
- “I skipped dinner last night because I had dessert”
- “You ate that much food?”

Address comments like these with the athlete privately and ensure appropriate support from a GP or Sports Physician, Sports Dietitian and or Psychologist is sought. If athletes are under - age, involve their parent. It is also important to keep in mind that across daily training environments, there may be other individuals providing or suggesting changes to nutrition advice, that are **not qualified** to do so – know who your nutrition expert is!

### What questions can you ask?

- “Did you remember to bring a snack to have between/after your sessions?”
- “Do you know what types of food are suitable to eat prior to the sessions planned for this week?”
- If your athlete is fatigued or not training as well – enquire about their sleep, energy, finances for food and ask if they think they are fuelling adequately. If responses are negative, encourage your athlete to seek assistance (around all things nutrition, meal planning, budgeting, time management, organisation or balancing multiple commitments etc.)
- “Are your perspectives performance driven or image/aesthetic based?”

### Thoughts and actions to remove from your ‘Coaches Toolkit’

- Recommending specific diets, cutting out foods/food groups, skipping meals, encouraging calorie tracking or promoting rigid food rules (despite a positive personal experience.)
- Use of judgement-implicit language with regards to any foods/drinks or activity – e.g. sluggish, heavy, bad, naughty, wrong/right, forbidden, guilty pleasure, guilt-free, clean, unhealthy ... etc, etc, etc!
- The urge to comment on an athlete’s or other support/team network member’s food choices or body. For example:
- “Do you really need that?” “You’re going back for seconds” “Wow you must be hungry today” “You’ve been in a good paddock”

### Thoughts to include in your ‘Coaches Toolkit’

- Be **aware** and never assume your athlete is always “okay” in this space - listen, talk and open this conversation up with your athletes, parents and entire support team!
- Create a culture that is safe, supportive and promotes positive relationships with individual bodies and performance nutrition.
- Be **proactive** in engaging with an [Accredited Sports Dietitian](#) and if you suspect any signs or hear red flags, intervene and involve a great support team around your athlete.

### Additional resources

For more support, please access and share these brilliant resources below from the Australian Institute of Sport and National Eating Disorder Collaboration.

- AIS x NEDC [Factsheet for Coaches](#)
- AIS x NEDC [Factsheet for Athletes](#)
- AIS x NEDC [position statement](#) on disordered eating in high performance sport.

