

3 NUTRITION TIPS FOR A PRODUCTIVE GYMNASTICS OFF SEASON

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For many of gymnasts, season is coming to a close which means summer or “off season” is right around the corner for Junior Olympic/Developmental Program Gymnasts. Elite season has just begun.

Everyone is itching for summer break and in gymnastics terms that gets translated into upgrading to new skills. Many gymnasts are still struggling with food and body from chaotic nature of the time when training was super inconsistent with this COVID season. Keeping this in mind, it is very important to continue proactive nutrition and recovery practices throughout their entire “improvement season”.

Being mindful of these 3 tips will help your gymnast not only learn harder skills, but will also reduce her chances of being injured and stabilize her mental health.

Rule Out Underfueling

RED-S is a condition that so many gymnasts develop due to underfueling. When your gymnast’s body is in an energy deficit, it goes into “survival mode”. The body begins to only put its energy towards the most important organs to keep your gymnast up and running. This means that many very important pathways in the body, like the menstrual cycle and bone repair, are put on hold.

This being said, if you know that your gymnast has unhealed stress reactions or fractures, is 15 and never had her period, or is 15 had her period and then lost it, it is very important to take them to their local pediatrician. Have the doctor go over her growth charts with you to make sure that she is gaining an adequate amount of weight and height this year. Even though she’s a gymnast, it is still essential that she is gaining weight every year.

The body is a pretty amazing thing and when your gymnast tries to keep her body as small and prepubescent as possible, the body fights really hard to be where it genetically is meant to be. That means during times of injury, illness, vacation, etc. there is often a rapid growth spurt that happens because the body is not meant to be in a 12-year-old state at age 16. Many gymnasts will tell you that they wish they could go back and gain weight each year rather than having their bodies change rapidly. This sudden growth spurt leads to your gymnast having to re-learn all the biomechanics of her skills, which is physically and mentally taxing.

This entire process of malnourishment, injuries, and sudden growth spurts is all rooted in under fueling. So, when your gymnast is going to physical therapy for her injury, check in with the physical therapist to make sure things are healing at the correct pace. Standard rule of thumb is that if her injury is not healing at the proper rate, it is a red flag that RED-S can be a contributing factor into the delayed healing.

Get Labs Done

Another important thing to get checked is your gymnast’s labs. Going to the pediatrician and having your daughter’s vitamin D, iron, and any other ones the doctor recommends is always a good idea. Through this, her doctor will be able to see any other signs that RED-S may be on the table for discussion. Unlike many other conditions, RED-S is not diagnosed by one specific diagnostic test. It is through a combination of labs, injury healing status, mood, food, etc. that this condition is diagnosed because it is so much more complicated than just labs. This being said, it is also super helpful to meet with a dietician to go over all of these things. Although pediatricians know about the side effects of malnourishment, dietitians have more specific knowledge and training around RED-S, leading to your daughter getting the best help that she can.

Rest And Recover

Now this tip often gets very mixed reviews as some gyms are all for giving their athletes a week off after season and letting them go on summer vacation. However, there are so many that “don’t believe” in

rest and recover days. Your athlete has been going non-stop all season long and her body needs a break.

The reality is that most gymnasts either under fueled and/or over trained, so it is essential that they have days to rest their bodies and minds. The 3-day test of no exercising, training, gymnastics stuff, etc., basically a Netflix day, will really provide some good answers as to whether your gymnast is struggling because of over training or under fueling.

If your gymnast takes 3 days off with complete relaxation mode in check and comes back to the gym feeling reenergized and in less pain, this is a great sign that your gymnast was just over trained. It just goes to show that there is no need to train an excessive number of hours because it actually hurts the gymnast more than it helps. However, if your gymnast takes those three days off and returns to the gym still feeling exhausted and in pain, this is the red flag that she is under fueled. Yes, she may also have been over trained, but with rest and adequate nutrition the body should be able to bounce back relatively quickly.

This being said, rest is ESSENTIAL to longevity in gymnastics. So many coaches say “while you are resting someone else is getting 1 day better”, and the truth is that your gymnast is also getting better even on a rest day. She is allowing her body to recover and heal so that the next day of practice can be productive, instead of not being mentally present and having to do 20 beam routines on a sprained ankle.

The name of the game in gymnastics is long term and the fastest and safest way to get there is by taking rest days.

Prepare For Summer Schedule

I know the last months of season are super chaotic and intra-workout nutrition may have slipped through the cracks a bit. However, it is super important now to reimplement that fueling technique as your gymnast's training schedule begins to switch. Making sure she is eating breakfast every morning is super important to go into the summer be adequately fueled. Many gyms switch to morning practices in the summer and fueling for a morning workout is not the same as fueling for an afternoon/evening practice. This all being said, it is a good thing to get your ducks in a row as far as breakfast and intra-workout nutrition, so that when training schedules do shift, the adjustment will not be so challenging.

Summary

- Take precaution against RED-S
 - Getting labs done
 - Going to the pediatrician to get growth charts checked
 - Doing extra rehabilitation for injuries
 - Go to a dietitian to get specifics on RED-S diagnosis
- Rest and recovery
 - Take 3 complete days off with no training what so ever
 - If after the 3 days your gymnast comes back and is rejuvenated, she was probably just over trained and needed rest
 - If after 3 days your gymnast comes back and is still tired and in pain, she is likely underfueled (as well as probably overtrained)
 - Rest and recovery is such a key component in maintaining longevity in the sport
- Prepare for summer schedule

- Making sure your gymnast eats breakfast every morning
- Getting her intra-workout nutrition back on track

With these three things in check, your gymnast is greatly increasing her chance of having a summer full of new skills and free from injury and exhaustion.