

News

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DALLAS--Too many athletes are spending money on protein powdered supplements that "just aren't necessary," says Dr. Donald Wiggans, professor of biochemistry and assistant professor of Continuing Education at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

The normal American diet, says Wiggans, provides more than enough protein for anyone. And that includes athletes.

"Coaches, however, are just like anybody else--they're looking for easy answers. If they hear a coach down the road uses a dietary supplement, they will start pushing their players to buy it, too." Also, runner's journals are full of "the old bunko," pushing "protein power."

The scientist classifies as "myth" the belief that consuming large amounts of protein supplements will increase an athlete's performance. In fact, Wiggans says there may be a direct comparison between "the number of promises" and the cost of these products sold in health food, drug and sporting goods stores.

"It's easy to spend \$15-20 a month for protein supplements. If the parents of student athletes come from the high-rent district, perhaps they can afford the unnecessary luxury. But if they come from the low-rent district, someone is making financial decisions important to the family in order to buy a worthless product. The father may say, 'All right, we'll skip the shoes your brother needs this month.' And that's not good."

Fortunately, there's no danger from eating protein supplement as long as it is a supplement to your diet. (Deaths have been reported from eating similar "diet" foods on long-term weight-loss diets to the exclusion of anything else.)

These foodstuffs are certainly no bargain. Since these products consist primarily of powdered skim milk with perhaps additional soy flour, the cost should run somewhere around 10 cents a pound. But protein supplements in the store are priced up to \$20 a pound, depending on the promises, the packaging and the ingredients, Wiggans says. "Besides, they don't do anything for you you couldn't do at the milk, meat and cheese counters in your neighborhood grocery."

It is true that athletes in training do need more calories than they do in off-season. However, this increase is probably only 15 to 20 percent. And, actually, these excess calories should come as carbohydrates.

"There is a lot of myth about the pre-game and post-game meals tied up with the 'protein-pushing' myth. The old idea of taking the team out for the steak and potato macho meal is out. They should be eating lighter than that several hours before they warm up.

"Actually, a pancake house is a better place to take the team before a game. Carbohydrates metabolize much easier than the protein in steak."

first add nutrition and athletes

It's not unusual to have nausea before, during or after a game, so if a player has "butterflies" in his stomach, he may not want to eat anything at all. Afterwards, it's okay to eat as soon as the players feel comfortable.

Wiggans says he once knew a "jock" who had his wife convinced that since they were on a limited budget, they needed to be eating different meals. She got the hamburger. He got top-grade steak!

"I explained in the presence of his wife his theory about the 'good' protein he needed to keep in shape was bunk. We were never good friends after that."

The converse side of the athlete-keeping-in-shape story, says the scientist, is the aging athlete who stays at the training table. He's the one who was a star in college, but doesn't make it in the pros. Maybe he goes to work for the local bank at an executive, but sedentary job.

A few years later, he's 30 pounds overweight and it's all fat. He doesn't need extra protein, and he doesn't need those extra 'training' calories he's still taking in.

Some coaches also encourage their players to buy expensive multi-vitamins and minerals, often sold at health food stores. Wiggans says that taking these extra vitamins and minerals is about like using protein supplement. It's very expensive and unnecessary.

An exception might be women athletes' taking supplementary iron since women tend to be more anemic than men. A simple blood test will indicate whether the woman needs to take iron in pill or capsule form.

Some athletes have started the practice of "carbohydrate loading." Developed by physiologists in Sweden in the 60's, carbohydrate loading works on the theory of depleting, then rebuilding the glycogen level in muscle to an even higher level for a maximized level of performance. Glycogen is the storage material in the body for carbohydrates and supplies glucose, a sugar that is a principal source of energy for living organisms.

The term "carbohydrate loading" comes from the special diet used in conjunction with training. Marathon runners exercise to the point of exhaustion in order to run their muscle glycogen down. Then for the next few days they eat exclusively a protein and fat diet that leaves their glycogen level depleted. This is followed by several days on a high carbohydrate diet, causing the glycogen level to rebound and go even higher.

While this technique works for long-distance runners, it is of no proven use whatsoever to other kinds of athletes, such as football or soccer players or runners of short sprints, says Wiggans. And he strongly advises marathon runners who use carbohydrate loading before big events to be careful to eat a well-balanced diet the rest of the time.

What is a well-balanced diet?

Wiggans says that the coach should consider using the school nutritionist as a consultant. In the meantime the high school athlete might well listen to his little brother or sister in elementary school who is studying the "four basic foods."

These children are learning that everyone needs food from the milk and dairy products, meat, fruit and vegetable and cereal and grain groups every day. In that way, they are getting the basic nutrients they need for a healthy diet.

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PHOTO OF WIGGANS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST