

THE REAL MEAL DEAL

By Richard Bell

Dear Rich,

How do I learn to eat like an athlete? I'm a 15-year-old girl, and I play fast-pitch softball.

This is the kind of question I love. Fifteen is a great age to start caring what goes into your body. So:

1. In general: if it doesn't fly, swim, walk, or isn't green — don't eat it.
2. Don't consume more than 50 grams of carbohydrates per day. I mean fibrous carbohydrates — lots of green vegetables and some whole grains.
3. Eat five small meals a day, each with a serving of lean protein.
4. Skipping meals makes you fat. Fasting trains your metabolism to be slow. Train your body to be hungry.
5. Caloric needs vary depending on your weight and lean body mass, which can be tested simply. Consult a pro for a reasonable daily calorie goal.
6. You, not your parents, must take the responsibility for eating right. Learn to cook with quality protein. Try scrambled eggs for breakfast, cottage cheese with blueberries for lunch, maybe a high-quality energy bar in between, and plenty of fruits and vegetables. This isn't really that time-consuming, but it does take planning. If you want the results, make the effort.
7. Forget the high school cafeteria. There's nothing there you want to eat.
8. Cut out the soda. It's terrible for you. It makes you fat, it messes with your bone density. If you haven't started with coffee, don't. Buy a jug of spring water. Carry it with you to all your classes. Drink the whole thing.
9. When you've learned to eat good food, your body will tell you right away when you eat something not so good. Listen to it.
10. Every high school has athletes who eat crap and survive on four hours of sleep. No one has those genes forever. Eventually, they'll pay.
11. Get out of your comfort zone. That means changing your workouts — make them more intense; and changing your eating — eat only quality food. It's a challenge, but people respond to that, and so can you.
12. If you want to look like a model in a magazine, remember that there's such a thing as skinny-fat. Tyra Banks wouldn't last 15 minutes in one of my workouts. Why idolize models, anyway? Half of them puke up their food; the other half are airbrushed. Look at photographs of female athletes if you want inspiration: Mia Hamm, Gabrielle Reese, Cheryl Swoopes and Venus Williams look better to me.
13. Plan one meal a week to eat whatever you want. Some well-known diets suggest an entire cheating day. In my experience, that's too much. And if you make a mistake, imagine you got a flat tire while driving. Would you get out of the car and flatten the other three tires? Of course not. You'd patch up the tire, and keep heading down the road. So if you fall off your eating plan, don't beat yourself up. Just get back on, and keep going.