

MINDFUL MUNCHERS

Teens Toolkit Volume 3

Sports nutrition, gut health, mental health and food, and your future.

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About This Toolkit

Volumes 1 and 2 covered the foundations: hormones, habits, labels, stress eating, and body image. Volume 3 is for when you want to go further: fueling your athletic performance, understanding your gut, how food connects to your mental health, and what your choices now mean for your future.

Sports Nutrition for Teen Athletes

If you play a sport or train regularly, your nutritional needs are different from someone who is sedentary. Here is what actually matters.

Carbs Are Your Fuel

Carbohydrates are the primary fuel for athletic performance. Cutting carbs as an athlete is like trying to drive a car with no gas. You will underperform, fatigue faster, and recover more slowly.

- Eat complex carbs 2 to 3 hours before training: oatmeal, whole grain pasta, sweet potato, brown rice
- During long sessions (90 or more minutes): banana, sports drink, or fruit for quick carbs
- After training: carbs plus protein within 30 to 60 minutes to replenish energy and rebuild muscle

Protein for Teen Athletes

Teen athletes need more protein than sedentary peers, but probably not as much as fitness influencers claim. Target 1.2 to 1.7g of protein per kg of body weight per day.

Good protein sources	Protein per serving
Chicken or turkey	26g per 3oz
Eggs	6g per egg
Greek yogurt	17g per cup
Canned tuna or salmon	20g per 3oz
Beans and lentils	15g per cup cooked
Tofu or edamame	10g per half cup
Cottage cheese	14g per half cup

Hydration

- Aim for at least 8 to 10 cups of water per day, more on training days
- Your urine should be pale yellow. Dark yellow means you need more water.
- Sports drinks are only necessary for sessions over 60 to 90 minutes of intense exercise
- Energy drinks before training worsen dehydration and spike cortisol

Note on supplements

You do not need supplements, protein powders, or pre-workouts as a teen athlete. Real food covers everything you need and without the risks that come with unregulated supplements.

Your Gut Health, Explained

Your gut contains trillions of bacteria collectively called your microbiome. These microbes influence digestion, immunity, mood, and brain function. What you eat shapes which microbes thrive.

What Hurts Your Gut

- Ultra-processed foods and excess sugar feed harmful bacteria and reduce microbiome diversity

- Antibiotics kill both harmful and beneficial bacteria. Always complete a course but do not use them unnecessarily.
- Chronic stress and poor sleep both negatively affect gut bacteria
- Low fiber intake starves beneficial bacteria

What Helps Your Gut

- Fiber from a variety of plants. Aim for 30 different plant foods per week. More variety means a more diverse microbiome.
- Fermented foods: yogurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut, miso. These contain live beneficial bacteria.
- Prebiotics: foods that feed good bacteria. Garlic, onions, bananas, asparagus, oats.
- Adequate sleep and stress management. Your gut and brain are directly connected.

Food and Mental Health

The connection between what you eat and how you feel mentally is real and well-researched. About 90 percent of the body's serotonin is produced in the gut. What you eat directly affects serotonin production and mental wellbeing.

The research

A 2019 meta-analysis found that dietary interventions significantly reduced depression symptoms across multiple studies. A diet high in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fish was consistently associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety in adolescents.

Foods that support mental health	Foods that work against mental health
Omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, walnuts, flaxseed)	Ultra-processed foods (linked to higher depression rates in large studies)
Fermented foods	High sugar intake (blood sugar crashes worsen mood)

Leafy greens (rich in folate)	Skipping meals (causes blood sugar drops that worsen anxiety)
Complex carbohydrates	Excess caffeine (increases cortisol and disrupts sleep)
Dark chocolate (70% or higher)	Sugary drinks (fast spike, faster crash)

Nutrition is not a replacement for mental health treatment. If you are struggling, talk to a trusted adult or counselor. But diet is a real and evidence-backed tool for supporting your wellbeing.

Thinking About Your Future

The habits you build now do not just affect how you feel in high school. They shape your health trajectory for decades.

If you build these habits now...	By your 40s you are more likely to...
Eating mostly whole foods	Have a healthy weight and lower chronic disease risk
Exercising regularly	Have stronger bones, heart, and metabolic health
Sleeping 8+ hours	Have lower risk of depression and cognitive decline
Managing stress well	Have lower cortisol and inflammation levels
Drinking water over soda	Have healthier teeth, kidneys, and body weight

The investments you make in your health right now pay off for the rest of your life, not in a distant abstract way, but in real energy, clarity, and resilience you will feel every day.

Weekly Habit Tracker

Print this out and track your week.

Habit	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Ate a fruit or vegetable							
Drank enough water today							
Got 8+ hours of sleep							
Moved my body 30+ min							
Ate a fermented food							
Ate breakfast							
Avoided a sugary drink							

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