Your body is your most important piece of equipment, and as an athlete, **it's your job** - with the help and support of your family - to keep it in top performance condition. When you show up with an undernourished body on game day, **it's because you have made many choices** about what, when and how much to eat in the hours, days, and even weeks prior. Food is your fuel. Starting today! Each time you fill up your tank, ask yourself these questions:

o Does this fuel have all, some, or none of the nutrition my body needs to perform at its very best?

o Have I chosen to put things into my body that might harm it?

o Am I filling my body with enough fuel? Am I filling it with too much?

o Does my engine need fuel right now or am I eating because I want to have a party in my mouth?

**Understanding Good Food Choices**

**What is a Carbohydrate?**

A carb is a component of food that gives energy to your body.

o Simple carbs are quickly changed by your body into a short burst of energy, and are found in foods like fruit, fruit juices, milk and sugar.

o Complex carbs take more work for your body to digest, convert and store in your muscles. They provide a longer, slower release of energy that is better when you need it to last, like during games or tournaments. Some foods that are good sources of complex carbs are vegetables, beans and whole grains.

**What is a Whole Grain?**

Grains are the seeds of plants. You’re probably already used to eating them in foods like bread, spaghetti, pancakes or cereal. When grains are whole, they contain all three of their parts: the bran, the germ, and the endosperm. Each of these parts is important and supplies important nutrients to your body.

In many cases when these products are made, the bran and the germ is stripped out to make them look whiter and softer, and to make them last longer. While white bread has very little nutrition and only provides short-term energy, whole grain bread is full of nutrients and is a good source of long-lasting energy.

When your family is buying bread, rolls, hamburger buns, pasta, waffles and other grain-based products, make sure that "whole wheat flour" or “whole grain” is listed as the first ingredient, to be sure that it’s truly a whole grain product. Other sources of whole grains include popcorn, brown rice, and quinoa (pronounced "keen-wa", similar to rice and absolutely delicious).

**What is Protein?**

Protein is something your body needs to grow, maintain and repair your muscles, and to make antibodies that keep you from getting sick. In food and in your body, it is made up of a chain (like a necklace) of molecules called amino acids.

Your body is amazing. Some of the amino acids it can produce all on its own. Some it cannot, called essential amino acids, and so you must supply them in the foods you eat if you want to be at your best.

Some protein food sources, called complete proteins, have all of the essential amino acids. Complete protein sources are foods like milk, eggs, meat, chicken, fish, and shellfish (like shrimp and crab). Incomplete proteins must be combined with other foods to supply your body with all of the essential amino acids. Examples of these are fruits, vegetables, beans, peas, lentils, grains, nuts and peanut butter. It's not necessary to have all of your essential amino acids supplied at each meal but it is a good idea to try to include them all during the day. Complete protein foods are not necessarily better because they have all of the amino acids. In fact, many of them contain saturated fats which should be limited for other reasons.

**What are Fats?**

Fat is another source of energy for the body. These are some things to think about when you're deciding whether or not, or how much, to include.

o Fats have the highest number of calories of any type of food, or about 9 calories per gram of fat. Carbs and proteins have about 4 per gram. Calorie is a measurement that gives you a guideline as to how much you should be eating. Everyone needs a different number of calories to keep their current weight, based on their age, gender and activity level. If you’d like to see what yours is right now, go to www.pediatrics.about.com/library/bl\_calorie\_calculator.htm.

o Some kinds of fat are important and necessary for our bodies to function well. Called omega-3 fatty acids, you can find these in fish (especially salmon), walnuts, olive oil and some beans.

o Some are healthy for us, called unsaturated fats, but still have lots of calories. They are found in foods like olives, nuts and avocados.

o Some foods contain saturated fats, such as red meat, eggs and whole milk. These should be chosen less frequently. Lean meat, chicken, fish, egg whites and fat free milk are lower saturated fat alternatives.

o Trans fats should be avoided because they are known to cause disease. These can be found in processed foods like store-bought cookies, cakes, french fries and donuts.

**Why are Fruit and Vegetables so important?**

They both provide critical vitamins and minerals. Vitamins and minerals are substances and elements that keep you free of sickness and disease, help you to grow and develop, and keep your organs functioning well. Some of the best sources are vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean meats. In general, processed foods have the least, and often none at all. Foods that are the closest to the way they grow when you eat them have the best source of vitamins and minerals for your body. For example, when selecting a snack, an apple would be your best choice. Homemade applesauce would be your second best choice, and store-bought apple pie would be your last. When you’re having lunch, left-over roast beef on your sandwich would be preferable to deli roast beef, and much better than beef jerky or a pepperoni stick.

**Developing Good Habits**

**Every Day**

o Aim to make every meal and snack a balance of healthy carbs, some lean (lower fat) protein and a small amount of healthy fats.

o Eat regularly, every 3-4 hours, as often as possible. Eat smaller amounts of food at lunch and dinner and enjoy a snack mid-morning and mid-afternoon. This will keep your energy balanced, your attention strong and your body supplied with consistent nutrition.

o **Don't skip breakfast!** It's your most important meal of the day. Get up 10 minutes earlier and enjoy! You can’t fool your body; in fact, when you try to cut calories by skipping breakfast, your body thinks it's being starved and it stores the calories as fat instead of using them as energy. Try whole grain cereal with sliced bananas or frozen blueberries, whole grain waffles with sliced peaches, walnuts and maple syrup or a slice of toast with peanut butter and bananas. What about an egg on toast with some cinnamon applesauce?

o **Drink plenty of water** - not all at once, but throughout the day. Aim **for 8 glasses** in total. By the time you feel thirsty, you are most likely already dehydrated.

Skip or cut back on sugary treats. Foods like candy, chocolate bars, donuts and pop tarts have lots of calories, bad fats, simple sugars and are often full of preservatives, artificial colors and flavor enhancers. Oh, and they have very few vitamins, minerals or other nutrients. Can you imagine that would help you become a better athlete? Pick fresh, frozen, or dried fruit (like raisins and apricots) and add some of your favorite nuts. Try hummus (a very nutritious dip made from chic peas) on a whole wheat pita. Whole grain crackers and cheese make a great snack. How about your favorite veggies like fresh broccoli, snap peas or cherry tomatoes with your favorite dip?

o **GIVE UP SODA**. It has no nutritional value and is full of chemicals and so much processed white sugar that when you drink three servings you shut down your immune system for an entire day while your body deals with the result. Treat yourself to low-fat chocolate milk or your favorite fruit juice when you get tired of water.

**Training and Games**

Drink lots of water pre-game. Skip the Gatorade. It's full of artificial coloring and sugar and nothing you really need. Unless your practice is intense and longer than 2 hours, water before, during and after is your best choice.

Have a light and healthy meal one hour before. Focus on healthy carbs and smaller portions for lots of energy and nutrients. Some good options are:

o whole grain pasta with tomato sauce and olive oil

o a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of strawberries

o homemade vegetable noodle soup

o tortellini with pesto

o Fruit shake or smoothie made with milk

After your game or practice, replace vital nutrients with a mix of protein and carbs, like:

o Eggs with whole grain toast and celery/carrot sticks

o Grilled chicken sandwich and a salad

o Salmon and brown rice

o Plain Greek yogurt (for extra protein) with fruit, granola and a drizzle of honey

o Tacos with lettuce, tomato and olives

o Baked potato with cheese, sour cream, corn, crabmeat or salsa