Food Allergies & Intolerances

Common food allergies (e.g. milk, wheat, nuts), sensitivities (e.g. caffeine), or intolerances (e.g. lactose) are related to gut symptoms (gas, bloating, nausea, cramping, diarrhoea) which can affect how well nutrients are digested and absorbed, thus impacting energy level and sport performance. A registered (sport) dietitian can help athletes keep an accurate food diary and to assess their sport diet.

First off though, it’s important to make sure an athlete has a true allergy or intolerance before restricting one or more food groups from their diet. Food allergies are difficult to diagnose and therefore medical advice from a physician and/or a qualified allergist should be the first step.

“Avoiding even one major food group without reliable nutrition advice can lead to nutrient deficiencies, especially over a long time.”

| Coach tips | • Check to see if the allergy or intolerance has been diagnosed by a physician or allergist;  
|           | • Refer the athlete to a registered (sport) dietitian to help them find acceptable food choices/alternatives that supply missing key nutrients (see SNAC dietitian registry);  
|           | • Monitor the athlete’s performance for signs of early fatigue or poor health (i.e. make sure they are meeting their energy needs especially during periods of growth and development;  
|           | • If the athlete has a true allergy, ask a professional or parent to educate the coach and team about specific foods that should not be consumed in team meals and snacks. |
| Athlete tips | • Find food alternatives that are well tolerated;  
|            | • Reduce gut symptoms;  
|            | • Eat without compromising energy, training, and competition. |
| Dietitian’s tip | • Keep a weekly food diary of all foods and fluids consumed each day noting times of eating, exercise/training, gut symptoms, and how you feel. Don’t forget hours of sleep! Bring this diary to your MD/allergist. |
Common Food Allergies & Intolerances

**Peanut/Nut allergies:**
Visit an allergist to determine if you have a true nut allergy which can be life threatening. Avoidance of peanuts or tree nuts may be in order. Check food labels and ingredient listings carefully and be aware that cross-contamination of food/products may occur even during best manufacturing practices.

**Wheat allergy or gluten intolerance (celiac disease):**
A bowel biopsy by an MD is needed for a definite diagnosis. Giving up all wheat products without medical/nutrition advice can be challenging and may lead to a deficiency of energy (carbohydrates) and key nutrients (B vitamins, iron, fibre).

**Milk allergy/lactose intolerance:**
A true milk allergy is different from lactose intolerance. A milk allergy requires avoidance of all milk products and is usually outgrown early in childhood.

Lactose intolerance is associated with a lack of lactase enzyme needed to break down lactose (milk sugar) and can be easily managed using lactose-free milk/products or alternatives that provide essential calcium, vitamin D, high quality protein, and carbohydrates. Always confirm lactose intolerance with your doctor to make sure there is not a more serious issue.

Lactose intolerance may be improved by: eating small amounts of foods with lactose daily; including foods containing lactose with other foods as part of a main meal; drinking beverages containing lactose (such as milk) with food.

**Caffeine sensitivity:**
This varies widely among individuals. Athletes often turn to this stimulant for an energy boost when in fact their training diet may be poorly planned. Too much caffeine can interfere with rest/sleep in addition to causing symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, headaches, irritability, and nervousness. Avoid high energy drinks with caffeine, excess coffee, and colas. Focus on healthy fluids from water, milk/alternatives, well-designed sport drinks, and 100% juices. Recommendation for child/adolescent: 2.5 mg of caffeine per kg of body weight/day.