

Immune-Driven Recovery: Optimizing Sports Nutrition for Performance and Repair

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DESCRIPTION

Athletic performance and recovery are intricately tied to physiological resilience, particularly immune competence and tissue repair mechanisms. In competitive and recreational sports alike, injury and illness can significantly disrupt training cycles and competitive readiness. As the demands placed on athletes grow in intensity and frequency, attention has turned toward the role of nutrition not just as fuel but as a powerful modulator of immune function and recovery capacity. A performance-focused nutritional strategy that supports immune health and enhances post-injury healing is therefore essential for athletes at all levels.

The immune system of an athlete is in a constant state of adaptation. While moderate exercise enhances immune surveillance and resistance to infection, prolonged or intense physical exertion can lead to temporary immune suppression, often termed the “open window” period. This phenomenon increases susceptibility to upper respiratory tract infections and delays recovery from muscle damage or trauma. Nutritional interventions during these periods are critical to minimize the risk of illness and facilitate rapid recovery, ensuring continuity in training and performance progression.

Macronutrient intake plays a foundational role in immune support. Sufficient energy availability is paramount, as chronic energy deficits impair leukocyte function, antibody production and cytokine responses. Carbohydrates, in particular, are key in moderating exercise-induced immune suppression. Consuming adequate carbohydrate before, during and after exercise reduces cortisol levels and maintains circulating glucose, helping preserve the function of immune cells such as natural killer cells and neutrophils. Inadequate carbohydrate intake during heavy training can result in prolonged inflammation and increased risk of illness.

Proteins are equally critical, especially during recovery from injury when muscle repair and immune cell proliferation are elevated. High-quality protein sources rich in essential amino acids, particularly leucine, stimulate muscle protein synthesis and support tissue regeneration. Moreover, amino acids like glutamine and arginine are known to play immunomodulatory

roles, supporting lymphocyte proliferation and macrophage function. While glutamine supplementation has shown mixed outcomes in immune function trials, it may provide benefits under conditions of extreme physical stress or injury when endogenous production is insufficient.

Fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids, contribute to the resolution of inflammation, which is central to effective recovery. Excessive or prolonged inflammation following injury can hinder tissue regeneration and increase the risk of fibrosis or re-injury. Omega-3s such as EPA and DHA modulate the production of pro-inflammatory eicosanoids and cytokines, facilitating a controlled inflammatory response. Emerging research also suggests a role for these fatty acids in reducing Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS) and enhancing muscle function post-exercise.

Micronutrients, though needed in smaller quantities, have outsized roles in immune support and injury recovery. Vitamins A, C, D and E, as well as minerals like zinc, iron and selenium, are integral to immune cell function, antioxidant defense and collagen synthesis. Vitamin C, for instance, supports neutrophil function and is essential for collagen formation—vital in ligament and tendon repair. Zinc is necessary for over 300 enzymatic reactions and plays a role in DNA replication and cell proliferation during tissue healing. Vitamin D, increasingly recognized for its immunoregulatory role, is linked to reduced risk of respiratory infections and enhanced muscle recovery. Given that athletes, especially indoor athletes or those training in northern latitudes, may be at risk of vitamin D deficiency, supplementation may be warranted during certain periods of the year.

In conclusion, nutrition is a powerful and multifaceted tool in optimizing immune function and accelerating recovery from injury in sports. Moving beyond traditional macronutrient focus to include micronutrients, bioactive compounds, hydration strategies and timing protocols allows for a comprehensive approach that supports both physical and psychological resilience. As sports nutrition continues to evolve, individualized, evidence-informed strategies tailored to the athlete’s specific sport, injury type and recovery phase will be key

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to minimizing downtime and enhancing return-to-play outcomes. Integrating nutrition into injury management not

only improves healing but also empowers athletes to take an active, informed role in their recovery journey.