Weight Management for Athletes
Intended for recreational or competitive athletes intending to lose weight

Weight loss regimens may impair training or reduce adaptations to exercise such as gains in muscle mass. Nevertheless, weight management may confer other advantages to athletes. Where possible, weight management should be performed in the off season. If weight loss is desired during the season, weight cycling, dehydration, very-low-calorie diets, and other extreme dietary strategies may be detrimental to both health and performance and increase the risk of injury. Menstrual irregularities among female athletes trying to maintain a low body weight may be especially detrimental to health.

**Calories** – a healthy caloric deficit that may minimally effect training appears to be 10-20% of caloric intake. For example, an individual consuming 3000 calories could reduce usual dietary intake by 300-600 calories. This can be achieved by increasing aerobic exercise, reducing food intake, or a combination of the two. No single approach seems to be the best for all situations.

**Protein vs Carbohydrates** – the International Olympic Committee recommends that competitive athletes increase protein and decrease carbohydrate to minimize reduction in lean mass. Intakes of ¾ - 1 ¼ g protein per pound body weight per day may be necessary for elite athletes trying to maintain muscle mass during weight loss. Recreational athletes, may find benefits with more a more modest recommended intake of ¾ g protein per pound body weight per day. A low-carbohydrate diet such as the Atkins diet is not recommended due to impairment of physical performance as well as evidence that low-carbohydrate diets are no better than moderate-carbohydrate diets in the long term.

**Vitamins and Minerals** – reduced dietary intake increases the risk of vitamin and mineral deficiency. Consume a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains and take supplements if needed to help meet recommended intakes of vitamins and minerals to support overall health and physical activity.

**Meal Frequency** – most trying to lose weight will find benefits from eating 5-6 meals or snacks daily. Among athletes or highly active individuals trying to lose weight, increasing the number of daily meals to 5 or 6 may increase the amount of fat lost and decrease the amount of muscle lost. This likely isn’t true for sedentary or recreationally active individuals. However, increasing meal frequency may provide other benefits for these individuals such as reduced hunger and improved markers of cardiovascular and metabolic health.

**Variety** – while dietary variety is generally encouraged to promote health, reducing variety may promote reduced caloric intake especially when variety of high calorie foods is reduced. If you do decide to reduce the types of food at each meal as well as limit variety from day to day, be sure to consult a doctor or dietitian to ensure you are consuming enough of all essential nutrients.

**Water** – replacing sugar sweetened beverages and sports drinks with water may help achieve reduced calorie goals. Studies have found an association between higher water intakes and improved weight maintenance and also noted enhanced weight loss when two glasses of water are drunk either before or with a meal independent of calorie consumption at the meal. While it is not fully understood how fluid intake is associated with long-term weight management, remaining well hydrated may be a valuable habit for athletes attempting to manage their weight.

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