



# Healthy Dancer Canada

The Dance Health Alliance of Canada

## EATING FOR ENERGY AND OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

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Dancers spend countless hours in the studio training to master the steps they perform. While most dancers understand that nutrition plays a role in this training, there is often confusion around what is the optimal diet. In reality, food and beverage intake will be different for each person depending on his/her age, intensity of training, and personal medical history. However, there are basic eating practices and nutrient requirements that apply to most dancers. Below is a table summarizing some excellent resources that give general guidelines around eating for optimal performance.

Organization	Summary of Handout	Web link
Canadian Paediatric Society	<i>Sport Nutrition for Young Athletes</i>	<a href="http://www.cps.ca/documents/position/sport-nutrition-for-young-athletes">http://www.cps.ca/documents/position/sport-nutrition-for-young-athletes</a> (Purcell, 2013)
Dietitians of Canada	<i>Nutrition and Athletic Performance – Position Paper</i>	<a href="http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloads/Public/noap-position-paper.aspx">http://www.dietitians.ca/Downloads/Public/noap-position-paper.aspx</a>
International Association for Dance Medicine and Science	<i>Fact Sheet: Fuelling the Dancer</i>	<a href="http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/dance_nutrition.pdf">http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/dance_nutrition.pdf</a>
International Association for Dance Medicine and Science	<i>Fact Sheet: Bone health and Dancers</i>	<a href="http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/bone_health_female_dancers.pdf">http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iadms.org/resource/resmgr/resource_papers/bone_health_female_dancers.pdf</a>
ActSafe	<i>Good Nutrition for Dancers</i>	<a href="http://www.actSAFE.ca/wp-content/uploads/resources/pdf/dancernutrition.pdf">http://www.actSAFE.ca/wp-content/uploads/resources/pdf/dancernutrition.pdf</a>

### The Dancer

#### **Meeting your daily nutrient needs**

It may seem hard to reach the recommended servings of foods every day, but with planning and preparation you will find you can do it! Whole, unprocessed foods should be the base of your diet, with convenience foods or packaged foods used on an as-needed basis when you are rushed for time or on the go. The following are some quick tips to help you fuel your body with the right foods (at the right time) for optimal performance:

- It is often recommended to eat breakfast then continue your day with a meal or snack every 3-4 hours to keep energy levels high. This is helpful for dancers who may not be able to have a traditional sit-down meal depending on their class or rehearsal schedules (Dietitians of Canada, 2008).
- Larger meals can be eaten after dancing, or at least 3 hours before dancing (to ensure proper digestion before exercise) (Sport Nutrition Advisory Committee, 2011).

- Carbohydrate-rich foods such as fruit, starchy vegetables or whole grains are an ideal snack before dancing (Dietitians of Canada, 2008). The amount will depend on how much time you have to digest and the type will depend on food preference and what works best for your body. Experiment with different carbohydrate rich snacks to determine what works best for you before training and competition.
- A balanced snack of protein and carbohydrate (e.g. chocolate milk, a piece of fruit with edamame beans, or brown rice crackers with almond butter) within 30 minutes of the end of your dance class will help with muscle recovery (Dietitians of Canada, 2008).
- Never forget to hydrate – sip water before, during and after dance classes. If you are dancing for longer than 90 minutes, you may wish to switch to a sports drink such as Gatorade or Powerade to help keep energy stores and electrolytes replenished (Clarkson, 2005).
- For more resources and ideas around recipes for meals and snacks for optimal dance performance, visit EatRightOntario (<http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/Articles/Physical-Activity/>) and the Coaching Association of Canada ([www.coach.ca](http://www.coach.ca)).

Sometimes you may find that the culture of your dance company is not supportive of healthy eating practices; water bottles may not be allowed in the studio, multiple classes may be scheduled back to back without nutrition breaks, or there may not be a place to eat. In many cases, these are oversights. Do not be afraid to speak to your dance educator, or studio owner, about the benefits of good nutrition. If they understand how diet positively impacts dance performance, they should be happy to incorporate nutrition and hydration breaks into the dance schedule.

## The Dance Educator

### *Setting the stage for healthy eating*

Nutrition is an important aspect of dance training. For dancers, it helps fuel their bodies and improve performance. For the dance educator, a healthy diet can improve stamina, concentration and overall health. Knowing how to encourage healthy eating for dancers of all ages, and implementing those guidelines yourself, is a key step in creating a healthy studio environment.

It may seem hard to reach the recommended servings of foods every day, but with planning and preparation you can show your students it is possible! Whole, unprocessed foods should be the base of your diet, with convenience foods or packaged foods used on an as-needed basis. Ideally nutrients should come from food, and supplements should only be used to offset a gap in dietary intake. In addition to the tips listed above for dancers, here are some quick tips to help you fuel your body with the right foods (at the right time) for optimal performance:

- To help teachers and dancers eat on a regular basis, think about adding meal/snacks breaks in class and rehearsal schedules.
- During a long teaching day, choose a balanced snack of protein and carbohydrate (e.g. chocolate milk, a piece of fruit with edamame beans, or brown rice crackers with almond butter) to sustain energy levels. Smoothies or meal replacement shakes can be used, but often will not sustain appetite or blood sugar levels for as long as solid food.
- Encourage dancers to hydrate all the time, and set the example by sipping water before, during and after dance classes yourself.
- Keep reminders about nutrition around the studio. Consider purchasing dance health posters from the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science ([www.iadms.org](http://www.iadms.org)) on the benefits of optimal nutrition for performance. Have a healthy snack recipe in studio newsletters, and send out reminders to pack snacks and fluids on long rehearsal and performance days.

## **Promoting positive body image and screening for eating disorders**

In the field of dance, students (both male and female) will often strive to achieve the long, lean, physique associated with many professional dancers. Unfortunately, there is a correlation between competing in aesthetic sports and eating disorders (Sungot-Borgen, 2004). As an educator, it is vital to foster positive body image and boost healthy eating habits to maximize training and performance. A few tips to help achieve this include:

- Use positive language that is not focused around the aesthetic of the body. Praising a student’s “long, gorgeous legs” may seem helpful, but it may make other dancers with different physiques feel inadequate. Choose to praise a student for effort, the use of proper technique or listening to corrections, as these are all reachable goals for the rest of the class, too.
- Be mindful of costume choices. Dancers are always looking at their own reflection, and skimpy costumes may add extra pressure on an insecure dancer to adopt unhealthy methods to be thinner or more muscular.
- Reinforce the value of fuelling the body for optimal performance. Stress that too few calories actually hinder the metabolism and can lead to loss in bone density, which places the dancer at a great risk of injury (Robson, 2010).

If you suspect that a student is restricting their intake to control weight, it is crucial to bring it to the attention of the dancer and his/her parents (if appropriate). Eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness (Sullivan, 2002) and early detection and treatment is essential to success. A discussion and screen with a family physician, and a referral to a specialized eating disorders clinic, is the standard course of treatment. The resources below provide excellent information about how coaches and teachers can help in the prevention, screening and treatment of eating disorders:

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Summary of Handout</b>	<b>Web Link</b>
National Eating Disorders Association	Coach and Athletic Trainer Toolkit	<a href="https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/coach-trainer">https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/coach-trainer</a>
Coaching Association of Canada	Eating Disorders: Signs, Screening, Confronting	<a href="http://www.coach.ca/eating-disorders-signs-screening-confronting-p154654">http://www.coach.ca/eating-disorders-signs-screening-confronting-p154654</a>
BodySense	Promoting Positive Body Image in Sport	<a href="http://www.bodysense.ca">www.bodysense.ca</a>

## **Finding a Health Professional**

If you find that you are having trouble putting nutrition advice into practice, it may be helpful to book a visit with a Registered Health Professional who specializes in dance or sports nutrition. Healthy Dancer Canada ([www.healthydancercanada.org](http://www.healthydancercanada.org)), the Coaching Association of Canada ([www.coach.ca](http://www.coach.ca)), the Performing Arts Medical Association ([www.artsmed.org](http://www.artsmed.org)), and the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science ([www.iadms.org](http://www.iadms.org)) provide directories of health practitioners (such as a Registered Dietitian) who can help tailor your diet to your specific training needs.

*\*Warning! It is advised that you consult with a Registered Health Professional from a recognized regulatory college in Canada. There are many individuals that advertise as a “health coach”, “personal trainer,” or “nutritionist” who do not have the equivalent education and training that a Registered Dietitian is required to have (i.e. a recognized 4 year undergraduate degree and post-graduate internship, plus membership to the regulatory college). This may put you at risk of adopting dietary habits that are not based on guidelines or best practices. It is important to research the qualifications of your consultant before beginning to work with him/her.\**

Please send feedback about this resource to [resources.healthydancercanada@gmail.com](mailto:resources.healthydancercanada@gmail.com).

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*Meal Preparation: Planning Pre-Exercise Meals from "At Home" to "On the Go."* Resource Paper. Sport Nutrition Advisory Committee, 2011. Available at

[http://www.coach.ca/files/SN\\_TIP\\_SHEET\\_JUN\\_2011\\_Meal\\_Preparation\\_en.pdf](http://www.coach.ca/files/SN_TIP_SHEET_JUN_2011_Meal_Preparation_en.pdf).

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