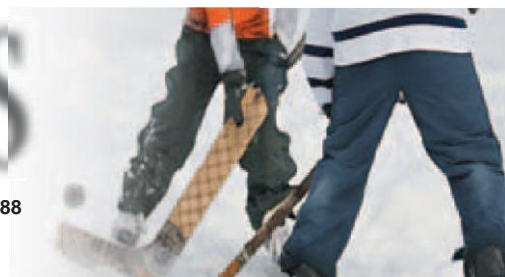


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Weight loss has to be done carefully



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In my last Training Matters article (Aug. 14) I talked about weight gain strategies for athletes. However, many athletes are at the other end of the spectrum trying to lose weight.

It is important for an athlete to understand whether weight loss is necessary or realistic. An athlete may already be at their optimal weight and by losing more weight can sacrifice muscle and strength and negatively impact their performance. In other cases athletes may have gained weight and find they are not performing as well as they did before the weight gain.

A registered dietitian can help an athlete with a balanced meal plan that meets the goals of reducing body fat, while maintain existing muscle and health. An appropriate training plan from a certified strength and conditioning specialist is also key.

There are some general guidelines for weight loss in athletes. Ideally weight loss should not be greater than half a kilogram per week. Weight loss should only be achieved during pre-season or off-season, not during regular season or competitions. Athletes should eat enough carbohydrates to fuel their muscles to train effectively.

Here are some strategies that athletes have found helpful to promote weight loss:

— Keep a food record. Tracking what you eat and drink each day helps athletes be aware of their eating habits and where there may be areas to cut back in calories. There are many food and activity tracking apps that make this an easy task with your smartphone or tablet.

— Eat regular meals and snacks to avoid overeating because of hunger. Eat most of your food during the day to help fuel your training rather than eating a lot in the evening.

— Plan your meals. Take time to prepare and pack healthy foods to take with you or to have ready so that you are not relying on fast food.

— Increase your vegetable and fruit intake. Aim to have greater than seven servings a day. They are a great source of carbohydrates to fuel your body and are packed with vitamins and minerals. They are also low in calories and contain fibre to help you feel more full for longer.

— Include a protein choice at each meal and snack to assist with satiety (feeling of fullness).

— Drink water throughout the day. Athletes have increased fluid needs when they are training. Make sure you carry a water bottle at all times to stay hydrated. Sometimes when we are thirsty we make the mistake of thinking we are hungry. Avoid drinking extra calories from sugar sweetened drinks, specialty coffees and juices.

— Choose lower fat milk and milk alternatives. Skim or one percent milk, lower fat yogurt, cottage cheese or hard cheese with less than 20 per cent milk fat are good choices. If milk isn't your thing try soy beverage instead. Both milk and soy beverage contain good sources of protein which is important for muscles repair and growth.

— Make good choices when eating out. Choose foods that have been steamed, grilled, broiled, baked or barbecued rather than deep fried or sautéed. Skip the fries and choose steamed vegetable or a green leafy salad with vinaigrette dressing to reduce the fat in your meal.

Weight loss takes time. Rapid weight loss through dehydration should be avoided as it can reduce an athletes strength and endurance. Athletes should work with a registered dietitian to plan a gradual weight loss plan that helps to reduce body fat and preserve muscle mass.

