Fuel for Finals!

By Sports & Wellness Dietitian Sheri Barke

If you want to perform your best for a big exam (or for a big game!), keep these 4 fueling tips in mind:

#1. **Eat a BALANCED meal or snack before your exams** (and every 3-5 hours during your long study days!). Balanced meals with BOTH carbohydrate-rich foods and protein-rich foods are best for 1) keeping your blood sugar levels steady (so your brain has energy to learn and apply information), 2) staving off hunger (so you can focus on Math and Biology instead of food!), and increasing brain chemicals that make you feel more alert (not sleepy!). Try one of these quick and healthy protein + carbohydrate snacks to fuel your brain and boost your performance:

- Scrambled eggs with whole wheat toast and a glass of OJ
- Yogurt (Greek has double the protein!) sprinkled with slivered almonds, granola, and berries
- Turkey and cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread with an apple
- Peanut butter spread on graham crackers with a banana and cup of low fat milk
- Homemade trail mix with nuts (almonds, peanuts, or walnuts), dried fruit, and whole grain cereal (Kellogg’s mini wheats, Cheerios, or Quaker oat squares).

#2. **Take active study breaks.** Exercise increases blood flow to your brain, not just your muscles. And, it’s a great release of stress and a natural energy booster. If you’re not training with your team during finals week, still make time for some short, fun work-outs on your own.
#3. Get a good night of sleep before your exams (and before your games!). The performance boost of a good night’s sleep (that’s 7-8 continuous, quality hours) is FAR greater than cramming a couple extra hours of studying into a tired brain. If you must skimp on sleep, do it a few days before (not the night before) your big test. Consider these facts:

- Cognitive performance with ≤6 hrs. of sleep is the same as getting no sleep for 48 hours!
- Just two days of sleep restriction to 4-5 hrs. per night leads to a 3 times increase in lapses of attention and reactivity.
- Maximum bench press drops 20 lb. after 4 days of restricted sleep (this won’t affect your test performance, but it will affect your game!).
- Sleep improves split-second decision making ability by 4.3%.
- Reducing sleep debt increases vigor by 64%!
- A 20-30 min. power nap improves alertness by 100%!!!

#4. Be sensible with caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant drug that temporarily boosts alertness, focus, and concentration (all good things, right?). But, it’s FAKE energy (only food and sleep provide REAL energy). So, if you grab a coffee or Red Bull in place of a balanced meal or good night’s rest, you’ll crash down hard later! And, if you’re sensitive to caffeine or consume too much, it could trigger anxiety, heart palpitations, nausea, heart burn, diarrhea, and/or sleep disturbance (not good things!). To get the perks of caffeine without the risks....

- Limit your total daily intake to 200 mg per day. Here’s the caffeine content of some common beverages: 16 oz. coffee = 200 mg, 16 oz. energy drink = 160 mg, 16 oz. green/black tea = 80 mg, 20 oz. bottle Pepsi = 70 mg.
- Stick with coffee or tea for natural sources of caffeine without all the untested, potentially unsafe combinations of stimulants in energy drinks.
- Consume with FOOD, not in place of food.
- Be aware that it takes about 6 hours for caffeine’s effects to wear off, so avoid it too close to bed time.