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Dietary Supplements: 5 Things to Know Now

Many adults take all of that with a large grain of salt. But when the consumer is a young athlete, and when the promise is improved performance through nutritional supplements, it's a different story. That's a potentially dangerous combination. Here Are 5 Essential TRUE and FALSE Points to Know – and Share – Right Now. Points that can empower a frank, fact-based conversation.

1. Supplements Are Regulated, Just Like Medicine.

FALSE. The FDA ensures all medications are made according to strict rules and that they are safe and effective. But it doesn't test or regulate nutritional supplements the same way. Because of this, supplements may contain ingredients that aren't legal, or aren't listed on the label.

Supplements may not be the same from batch to batch, and they may even contain substances that are considered performance-enhancing drugs.

2. Supplements May Lead to Malnutrition.

TRUE. While too much sodium can have debilitating effects for the average Joe, for competitive athletes it can be the difference between still being able to play hard in the fourth quarter and crashing hard on the bench. For the average American, the USDA recommends an intake of less than 1500-2300 mg of sodium per day, however for an athlete in hot conditions this demand is higher. Insufficient sodium levels can result in cramps, headaches, nausea, and hyponatremia (a low concentration of sodium in the blood).

To combat this intense sodium loss, slightly up the intake of sodium leading up to and during intense summer sport days. This can be done through sources that help fulfill athletes' other nutritional needs at the same time, such as vegetable juices, soups, whole grain snacks like crackers and pretzels, rice cakes, condiments, prepared or cured meats, and sports drinks.

3. Energy Supplements Don't Pose Any Risks.

FALSE. Nobody disputes that energy supplements work. That's because they contain stimulants like caffeine. Unfortunately, kids may not have the experience to make informed choices about caffeine use. Secondly, there could be more caffeine than you think. Ingredients like green tea also deliver a massive amount of caffeine. Some energy supplements contain up to 250mg of caffeine. To put that in perspective, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that adolescents over 12 should limit caffeine intake to 85-100mg/day. And children under 12 shouldn't consume caffeine at all!



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True/False on Supplements, continued

4. Supplements May Promote a "Shortcut Mentality."

TRUE. There's no "magic bullet" for athletic performance. But if young athletes rely on supplements instead of real food, hard work, rest, and proper nutrition, they may start to believe otherwise. Being an athlete requires discipline, commitment, and hard work – the same qualities required for success in life. Looking for the easy way to reach a goal rather than the right way can create negative patterns of behavior, and take you places you really don't want to go.

5. Supplements Are Largely Unnecessary for Young Athletes.

TRUE. Strength and speed come naturally as young athletes mature. So, it makes sense to focus on other things, like skill acquisition, cognitive development, work ethic, sleep, nutrition, and other good habits. If youngsters rely on the "extra" strength or speed promised by a supplement, they may miss out on those critical factors. They're trading lasting skills and abilities for short-term gains – gains that will eventually even out as their teammates catch up in terms of physical development.

