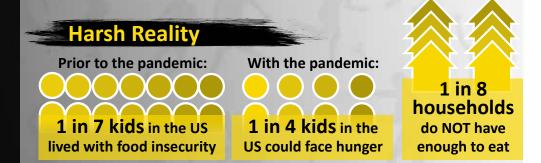**LESLIE BONCI,** MPH, RDN, CSSD, LDN

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The pandemic has been a major disruptor for student athletes, parents, coaches, schools and communities. Learning may be taking place at home, practices are masked and socially distant, and unfortunately hunger has become an increasing problem in this country. For kids learning at home, it's important to remember that they may not have consistent access to breakfast and lunch like they normally would have at school. Food choices at home may have changed and more families are now reliant upon food boxes from outside sources like community centers and food pantries/food banks.

FEED THE NEED:
Hunger in the Locker Room

Harsh Reality

Prior to the pandemic:

1 in 7 kids in the US lived with food insecurity

With the pandemic:

1 in 4 kids in the US could face hunger

1 in 8 households do NOT have enough to eat

Inadequate intake adversely affects student athletes physical and mental health making it more difficult to learn, practice, grow well and stay well, mainly due to low blood sugar levels. These negative impacts include:

- Poor ability to concentrate
- Falling asleep
- Irritability
- Lack of focus
- Poor recall of information
- Higher level math, science courses are most difficult

The concern is two-fold: food insecurity and nutrition insecurity. While there may not be enough food to eat, it's important to remember that student athletes are also become nutrition insecure. Getting optimal amounts of macros: carbohydrate, protein and fat; micros: vitamins and minerals; phytos: plant chemicals in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and grains and hydros (fluid) is critical in the growth and development of these young athletes, and overall well-being.

Food Deserts are areas where there is limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables and there is a smaller selection of these foods sold at a higher price point. Food Deserts may also be Food Swamps where there is increased availability of high calorie, high fat foods usually sold through fast food establishments.

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Student Athlete's Nutritional Needs

A student athlete needs enough food for growth and development as well as fuel for optimal sports performance. How has the pandemic impacted eating habits and behaviors? What are some of the barriers?

- Food deserts and swamps
- Knowledge deficit- what is good nutrition?
- Lack of cooking skills
- Lack of time- going to school and working
- Limited financial resources- made worse by the pandemic
- High calorie needs to fuel growth and development and physical activity
- The National School Lunch program provides between 750-850 calories for lunch (high school)

Age (yr)	Calories (median)	Kcal/cm (medium)	Protein (grams)
MALE			
11-15	2500	15.9	45
15-18	3000	17.1	59
FEMALE			
11-15	2200	14	46
15-18	2200	13.5	44

Low Cost - High Nutritional Value Foods

Protein	Produce	Grains
Milk: fresh, evaporated, non fat dry	Canned vegetables	Oatmeal
Eggs	Canned fruit	Store Brand Cereals
Canned fish	Potatoes	Rice- white or brown
Canned chicken	Canned or frozen corn	Pasta
Beans - canned or dry	Bananas	Barley
Texturized vegetable protein	Apples	Popcorn
Peanut butter	Cabbage	Tortillas
Ground beef	Canned tomatoes	Frozen pizza crust
Frozen shredded chicken	Vegetable/bean soup	Pancake mix
Frozen fish fillets	Spaghetti sauce/salsa	
Large containers of yogurt		
Cheese		

Be Your Athlete's Advocate

What can you do?
- Gain their trust
- Consider making energy breaks before and after practice mandatory
- Organize breakfast to go bags
- Consider establishing a "lending locker"
- Be careful of the words you use/ guidelines for students
- Encourage parents and booster club involvement to put together budget bags or provide items for the lending locker
- Provide resources
- Ask a parent if they would be willing to do a cooking demo for your athletes
- Reach out to a local grocery store to see if they would conduct a tour

What not to do?
- Food shame or blame
- Recommend pricey supplements over food
- Encourage restrictive eating patterns or food group elimination

Bottom Line

Food insecurity can have long lasting consequences. Help to nurture and nourish to allow your athletes to flourish. Create an atmosphere of support that feeds the need to help your athletes succeed.

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