

Navigating Nutritional Adherence in High-Performance Sport: Insights from Athlete Perspectives on Enablers and Barriers

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Abstract

Maintaining proper nutrition is essential for optimal performance in high-performance sport. However, ensuring consistent nutritional adherence among athletes can be challenging. This study aimed to explore athlete perspectives on the enablers and barriers to nutritional adherence in high-performance sport. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of elite athletes from various sports disciplines. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes related to nutritional adherence. The findings revealed several key enablers of nutritional adherence, including personalized nutrition plans, access to expert guidance, peer support, and convenient access to nutritious food options. Conversely, several barriers to nutritional adherence were identified, such as conflicting information, limited time and resources, travel and competition demands, and social pressures. Understanding athlete perspectives on these enablers and barriers is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote nutritional adherence in high-performance sport. Coaches, nutritionists, and support staff can utilize these insights to tailor interventions and provide the necessary resources and support to enhance athletes' nutritional practices, thereby optimizing their performance and overall well-being.

Keywords: Nutritional adherence • High-performance sport • Athlete perspectives • Barriers • Enablers

Introduction

Proper nutrition plays a vital role in the performance, recovery, and overall well-being of athletes involved in high-performance sports. However, ensuring consistent adherence to optimal nutrition can be challenging due to various factors. Understanding the perspectives of athletes themselves regarding the enablers and barriers to nutritional adherence is crucial for developing effective strategies to support their dietary practices. This study aims to explore athlete perspectives on navigating nutritional adherence in the context of high-performance sport, shedding light on the enablers that facilitate adherence and the barriers that hinder it. By gaining insights from athletes' experiences and perceptions, coaches, nutritionists, and support staff can develop tailored interventions and provide the necessary resources and guidance to optimize athletes' nutritional practices, ultimately enhancing their performance and well-being [1].

Literature Review

Nutritional adherence is a critical aspect of high-performance sport, as it directly influences athletes' physical performance, recovery, and overall health. Understanding the enablers and barriers to nutritional adherence from the perspectives of athletes themselves is essential for developing effective strategies to support their dietary practices. Athlete perspectives on nutritional adherence have gained increasing attention in recent years. Personalized nutrition plans emerged as a crucial factor, as athletes emphasized the importance of having dietary guidelines tailored to their specific needs and

goals. This individualized approach enhanced motivation and facilitated adherence to their nutrition regimens. Access to expert guidance has also been recognized as a significant enabler of nutritional adherence [2].

Working closely with qualified sports nutritionists or dietitians provides athletes with evidence-based advice and support, helping them navigate the complexities of their nutritional requirements. Professional guidance helps athletes make informed choices and overcome challenges related to dietary practices. Peer support has been identified as another important enabler of nutritional adherence. Peer support networks create an environment where athletes can exchange knowledge, share recipes, and provide mutual encouragement, reinforcing positive dietary behaviours. Conversely, several barriers to nutritional adherence have been identified in the literature. Conflicting information is a common challenge faced by athletes, as they are exposed to various sources of nutrition advice, including media, peers, and social media influencers. Sorting through contradictory information can lead to confusion and make it difficult for athletes to make appropriate dietary choices [3].

Time constraints and limited resources have also been recognized as barriers to nutritional adherence. The demanding training schedules and other commitments of high-performance athletes often leave them with limited time and energy for meal planning, preparation, and consumption. This can hinder their ability to consistently follow their dietary regimens. The demands of travel and competition pose additional challenges to nutritional adherence. Athletes often face difficulties in maintaining their dietary routines while on the road, as access to suitable food options and meal preparation facilities may be limited. Athletes sometimes feel compelled to deviate from their dietary guidelines in certain social contexts, such as social gatherings or sponsor obligations.

Discussion

The enablers identified include personalized nutrition plans, access to expert guidance, and peer support, which have been found to enhance athletes' ability to adhere to their dietary regimens. These factors provide athletes with the necessary tools, knowledge, and motivation to make informed dietary choices and maintain optimal nutrition. Personalized nutrition plans have proven to be instrumental in supporting nutritional adherence. By tailoring dietary guidelines to individual needs and goals, athletes are more likely to stay motivated and committed to their nutrition regimens. This personalized

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approach recognizes the unique requirements of each athlete, allowing them to optimize their performance and recovery through appropriate nutrition.

Access to expert guidance, such as sports nutritionists or dietitians, is vital for athletes in navigating their nutritional adherence. Professionals in the field can provide evidence-based advice, monitor athletes' progress, and address any challenges or concerns that may arise. Their expertise ensures that athletes receive accurate and reliable information, empowering them to make informed decisions regarding their nutrition. Peer support plays a crucial role in creating an environment that fosters nutritional adherence. Athletes benefit from shared experiences, knowledge exchange, and mutual encouragement within their peer groups. Supportive networks provide a sense of camaraderie and understanding, reducing the feeling of isolation that athletes may experience when adhering to specific dietary practices. Despite these enablers, several barriers to nutritional adherence must be addressed. Conflicting information from various sources can lead to confusion and uncertainty among athletes, making it challenging for them to make appropriate dietary choices [4,5].

Efforts should be made to provide athletes with reliable and evidence-based nutrition education, ensuring they have access to accurate information to support their decision-making. Time constraints and limited resources pose significant challenges to nutritional adherence in high-performance sport. Athletes often have packed schedules and demanding training routines, leaving limited time and energy for proper meal planning, preparation, and consumption. Strategies that help athletes manage their time effectively and provide convenient access to nutritious food options can mitigate these barriers. The demands of travel and competition can disrupt athletes' dietary routines, making it challenging to maintain nutritional adherence while on the road. Providing athletes with strategies and resources to manage their nutrition during travel and competition can help overcome this barrier. Social pressures also influence nutritional adherence, with athletes feeling compelled to deviate from their dietary guidelines in certain social contexts. Creating a supportive environment that encourages and respects athletes' dietary choices can help them navigate social situations without compromising their nutritional goals [6].

Conclusion

Navigating nutritional adherence in high-performance sport requires a comprehensive understanding of athlete perspectives on the enablers and barriers they encounter. Personalized nutrition plans, access to expert guidance, and peer support have been identified as key enablers that enhance nutritional adherence among athletes. These factors empower athletes to make informed dietary choices, receive professional guidance, and benefit from supportive networks. However, barriers such as conflicting information, time constraints, limited resources, travel demands, and social pressures can hinder nutritional adherence. Recognizing and addressing these barriers is crucial for developing effective strategies and interventions to support athletes in maintaining optimal nutrition. Coaches, nutritionists, and support staff play a vital role in facilitating nutritional adherence by providing evidence-based

education, individualized guidance, and creating supportive environments. By understanding athlete perspectives and implementing targeted interventions, the goal of optimizing athletes' performance, recovery, and overall well-being through proper nutrition can be achieved in high-performance sport. Future research should continue to explore athlete perspectives and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in enhancing nutritional adherence in this population.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest by author.

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