The Impact of Pre-exercise Snacks on Exercise Intensity, Stress, and Fatigue in Children

Jennifer M. Sacheck, Tamar Kafka, Helen Rasmussen, Jeffrey B. Blumberg, and Christina D. Economos

Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University, Boston, MA.

PURPOSE: Few studies have examined how the composition of snacks affects athletic performance in children. We investigated whether the macronutrient and flavonoid content of 3 pre-exercise snacks differentially affected exercise intensity, stress, and post-game fatigue in young soccer players.

METHODS: At 1 h prior to a 50-min soccer game, 115 children (9.1 ± 0.9 y) were randomly assigned to consume 1 of 3 isocaloric snacks: 1) nutrient dense/high flavonoid (HF) raisin/nut bar; 2) low flavonoid (LF) peanut butter graham bar; or 3) low flavonoid/high sugar (LF/HS) rice cereal bar. Blood glucose and salivary cortisol and IgA were measured before consuming the snack and immediately following the game. Game exercise intensity was measured by accelerometry. Self-administered questionnaires were used to assess diet quality and physical and mental fatigue after the game.

RESULTS: The children spent approximately 33% of the game in moderate to vigorous activity and 49% of the game in sedentary activity. The snack consumed was not related to exercise intensity. Mean post-exercise blood glucose (P<0.001) and cortisol (P<0.05) increased and IgA levels decreased (P<0.001) from pre-game values. The pre-exercise snack did not predict the post-exercise outcome for any of these parameters after controlling for pre-exercise values of the biomarkers, age, gender, BMI, exercise intensity, game-time water consumption, and diet quality. Children who reported symptoms of fatigue were more likely to have consumed the LF/HS snack (P<0.05).

CONCLUSIONS: The pre-exercise snacks formulated for this study did not affect blood sugar or salivary biomarkers of stress following a soccer game in young children. The nutrient content of the single snack did not differentially influence these biomarkers or the exercise intensity; however subjective feelings of fatigue may be associated with low flavonoid/high sugar snacks. Future investigations are warranted to further explore the effects of pre-exercise snacks on exercise, performance, stress and fatigue in children.