



Simple & Smart Nutrition Strategies for Growing Teens with Beth McCall RD, CSSD (ep – 83)

[00:00:01] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** If I asked you, do you want to be 13 again? Many of you are going to answer a resounding no. Adolescence is such a challenging time. You're growing in new ways, so busy between school, friends, practices, and everything else in between. And at the same time, you're soaking up messages about who you're supposed to be, your relationship to food, and what it means to fit in. Even if you're long past that age, maybe your child or someone in your life is just entering it. And with that comes conversations about food and body, conversations that you as a parent, guardian, or coach are hoping to get right. And if this sounds like you, I think you're going to love today's episode with Beth McCall. She's a performance registered dietitian nutrition expert. And the way she talks about fueling teens is practical, realistic, and so supportive. Honestly, listening back, you might find yourself thinking the same thing I did. I sure wish someone had said this to me when I was that age. So if you're looking to support your teen's nutrition in a way that builds real, sustainable habits, or you love learning about fueling fitness, stick around. Before we jump in, I want you to do one thing, put yourself in a teen's shoes. Applying adult food rules to a growing, developing body usually doesn't work. So much is changing in adolescence, and meeting those changes the same way you would with your own body is likely not the right strategy. I also wanna say this upfront, no one is gonna be the perfect parent or supporter when it comes to fueling teens. Life is unpredictable. Schedules are chaotic. Teens are teens. And that's why I love where Beth and I go in this conversation because the strategies she shares are not about having the perfect plan. They're about having a few anchors that work. So to start, I wanna dive into Beth's story because she's personally and professionally connected to this topic. Then we're gonna zoom out and talk about what's happening in the body during adolescence. Let's get into it. Beth, welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you're here.

[00:02:34] **Beth McCall** Awesome, yeah, thanks so much for having me, Ginger.

[00:02:36] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I'm really excited about your expertise. As a former athlete yourself, you work with young athletes and that's a deeply personal thing for you. Can you share a bit more about your story and how it drew you to this work?

[00:02:48] **Beth McCall** I started playing variety of sports at a pretty competitive level at a fairly young age. I found myself in middle school into high school, facing various pressures as an athlete too with little to no education around proper fueling, what that looked like. And then even when I transitioned from high school to being a D1 athlete and a nutrition student myself, I still didn't have it figured out. I didn't have all the resources around me until junior, senior year of college when I started fueling my body properly. By that time, years of under-fueling. My body was undergoing so many different injuries, cycle disruptions, performance inconsistencies, that even when I was starting to feel my body, there were still certain complications that I personally had to deal with long after those chronic years of under-fueling. And then when I flipped roles and became a professional working with collegiate athletes, I've seen so many kids come to college, come to those elite levels, no matter how talented they are, their body is already a little bit broken and some of that could have been prevented by proper fueling. I've developed such a passion to step into that younger age now. How can we get ahead of this to prevent that struggle that they you may see later on down the road.

[00:03:53] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I totally agree with you that student athletics have come so far, but I don't know if the education and training for how to fuel that has come far. And I was not a pro athlete. I want to make that very clear, but I was an everyday athlete. I did ballet and I did skiing and I did gymnastics. And I remember the busses will drop you off at a store, and all of a sudden there's a 115 year olds in a grocery store. What are you getting? Do you know what you're aiming for? Did I ever drink water? Pretty sure no.

[00:04:21] **Beth McCall** That's definitely still happening today, and it even happens at our college levels.

[00:04:25] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** We really need to talk about this because adolescence is this time of really rapid change. From your perspective, what does that look like as far as what's happening in the body and how teens' fueling needs are shifting?

[00:04:39] **Beth McCall** There's so much change going on through these adolescent years. Young teen to older teen as well is very different. A way that I find myself explaining it to young athletes and to their parents especially is that whether you see it or not, your body is continually building new hardware under

the hood. And that hardware building requires so much energy. And then on top of that, you're asking yourself to train for your sport. So physically demanding on such a young body as your muscles are still growing, your bone development is so key, brains are developing. Going through puberty for our female athletes, menstrual cycle is around the corner if it hasn't already come. So helping them to understand that even on a rest day or on a day that doesn't feel like they're working that hard in their sport, their bodies are still working hard and that requires so much energy to keep that development on track.

[00:05:26] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I feel like a lot of people don't realize this because you think about the student as an athlete and how are they gonna perform, but it's also they need to fuel the basic functions that are changing at that time. I'd love to hear more about how you approach key nutrients for teens in regards to the macronutrients, protein, carbohydrates, and fat. How do you educate about that?

[00:05:47] **Beth McCall** The terminology that I use often, it can sometimes sound a little cliché, and that's simply that we need to think of our bodies like cars. Everybody needs to think about it like a car, but especially an athlete. You can fit the macronutrients into that analogy quite well. So carbs are what drives the engine. So that provides our main fuel source. So it's the gas for the car. Protein is what builds and repairs that car when things are broken down, everyday wear and tear, growth and repair of our muscles, injury, prevention, recovery. Fats are what keeps your system running steady through our hormone regulation, our brain health, providing that cushion for the joints, the lubrication for the parts of the car. As an athlete expecting your body to perform, we need to put high quality macronutrients into our car if we want to keep that check engine light off. It's a simple analogy that sticks. So once they understand how important each macronutrient is, then I like to turn to the athlete's plates.

[00:06:42] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I love that. As a non-athlete, I feel like I actually haven't heard that before, and it's really fun, and it's simple, and it also highlights that you need all of these nutrients to be running correctly. When it comes to the macronutrient protein, do you leverage protein powders or shakes with teens or do you focus on the whole foods?

[00:07:01] **Beth McCall** I definitely focus on a combination of both just depending upon what the use case is for and the timing of it. Protein shakes and protein powders, am I necessarily building them onto the plate for a meal more likely than not? But in quick recovery or on the go, there's definitely a use for protein shakes, protein powders and there's plenty out there that are safe and taste bud friendly for youth athletes all the way up to adult athletes. In that immediate recovery, you can use food, but what is a little bit more palatable is

something that's easy to just drink. And that can come in the form of a protein shake or a protein powder. But then when you shower and you go to have your meal after that, then we're going to sit down and we're gonna have a whole food source.

[00:07:42] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It can be both. One way that I love to use protein powders is when people are having a hard time meeting their protein needs. It's such an easy drinkable concentrated source. I often say you can get 20 to 30 grams just in a beverage and it's so easy to digest or take on the go.

[00:07:59] **Beth McCall** Absolutely. Let's say you're having oatmeal. Let's level up that oatmeal and add some protein powder to it. That's going to help make a more balanced meal to something that was maybe composed of just one main macronutrient.

[00:08:10] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** But I'm interested also in how you talk about calories as a tool regarding fueling and energy.

[00:08:19] **Beth McCall** I rarely use the term calories, because unfortunately, what is a simple definition of like calories equal energy, and that's it, it's that simple. It can sometimes feel intimidating, given what our society has turned calories out to be. But at the same time, you don't want to avoid talking about them, because that's exactly it, you want to normalize it, it's energy. And then there are some scenarios, whether it be a specific medical condition, or depending upon the type of sport, I work a lot with elite level wrestlers, and we have to talk numbers in those scenarios. I still try to shift the language to energy or fuel needs, teaching that calories are a good thing. They're not an enemy. Your body needs them. It's the gas for your car. With that, in that conversation, I also like to teach on signs of what does it look like when we're getting enough calories, when we are getting enough fuel. So are my energy levels stable and consistent? Are we seeing normal growth patterns? That's usually more of a parent conversation. Do I feel recovered after my workouts or we're really tired? Teaching what does it look like to get enough and what does it look like when I'm probably not getting enough.

[00:09:19] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It's such a great way to also tune into how are you feeling and how are performing. I do agree with you that calories or carbs can be this negatively charged word, which is not super fair to those nutrients. The other thing that I hear a lot about is snacks. And I think snacking is another emotionally charged, maybe controversial topic. How do you deal with snacks and teen athletes?

[00:09:44] **Beth McCall** They're essential. It's as simple as that, and I educate on that. I like to say having balanced snacks in your backpack or on the go with you all the time are just as important as having your books and your class materials. Because if you don't have the snacks to fill your gaps between your meals or to make sure that you are getting all of that energy, you're not even going to be able to focus on what's in those books that are in your backpack. So you always have to be prepared. Be prepared with snacks that can help support pre-practice fuel, gaps between You don't want to go too long to help prevent getting over hungry. And sometimes in athletes, especially in college athletes, but definitely in a younger athlete as well, it's hard to get that traditional breakfast, snack, lunch, snack dinner meal pattern that we're taught we need to have. And it's okay to have breakfast, snack, late lunch, snack, dinner sometimes. A terminology that I use is gold medal snacks is what we wanna get majority of the time. And to make it gold medal, you're always pairing a carb with a protein or a carb with a fat that's going to give you energy from that carbohydrate and then the protein or the fat is going to help keep you full. So pairing the two together, levels that snack up to do its job.

[00:10:53] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I love that. It's a really nice way to keep it simple too. I was working with one of my younger patients the other day, and I was talking about pairing carbs with protein. And then I looked at them and I said, do you know what a carb is and what a protein is? And they didn't. And so that was a really great moment for me to be like, oh, I need an extra layer of education. So I'm interested if you could give a few examples of what this kind of snack pairing looks like in real life for you.

[00:11:20] **Beth McCall** So, a banana is your carb, and peanut butter would be protein and fat combined. Or making a simple wrap, deli turkey and cheese. You've got the wrap would be your carb, the turkey and the cheese would be you protein and your fat in. Fruit and nut trail mix is in and of itself a gold medal snack from the carb with the fruit and the nuts for some protein and the fat. I like to provide a mix and match chart of different carbs on one side, protein options on the other, and then people can pick and choose. It also helps with variety.

[00:11:47] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I totally agree with you being very pro snack, but especially for a student athlete on the go, there's a level of packing the snack and buying the snack and having the snack ready that people have got to be able to execute in order to eat the gold medal snacks.

[00:12:02] **Beth McCall** It can feel intimidating, but I talk a lot about trying your best to set your environment up for success, having those things stacked up, knowing what are your essentials, what are your go-tos and you can grab

something quick and on the go, but also not stressing if you're not perfect every day.

[00:12:16] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Maybe sometimes you have a banana, and it's on its own, but that's still good because it's still fuel and it's still a healthy option. A lot of these families are doing late practices, early mornings. So some meals are probably going to happen on the go. So I'm interested in how you work with parents, thinking about a healthy meal on the, whether they're meal prepping everything. What do you do in this scenario?

[00:12:42] **Beth McCall** A combination of both of having to eat out or potentially if you have the time to plan ahead and bring meals on the go. Although there's some exceptions to this, for the most part, you can find a way to build a performance plate at just about any restaurant, even some fast food places that you'd never think would make the list. You don't want to opt to eat out all of the time, but when you're traveling or parents are bouncing multiple kids from one practice to the other, it's almost impossible and eating some dinners better than skipping it entirely. When you're going to a restaurant, I like to look for buzzwords from the protein side, try to look for grilled or baked in the option. Try to choose those leaner protein options. Always finding a starch. If they have whole grain brown rice or the whole wheat bread available, try and choose that, and then seeing how you can add in color. A lot of places have fruit. Or if you have those snacks in your car, you can get your main entree and then you can add an applesauce and pretzels or something to it to help build more of a meal. Breaking it down of understanding like how do I decode this menu and not just think like that the things at the top of the menu are what I have to go for. A way for parents to be supportive too is definitely not shaming any choices that their kids make when they're eating out, but also maybe adjusting your choices to support or what you want your kid to choose as well.

[00:13:54] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I tell my patients, no matter what menu you're looking at, any menu in the whole world, you have options. And so it's about thinking within this menu you mentioned. Do you have people that work on meal prepping? Do you find that is possible for busy families or how do you approach that?

[00:14:12] **Beth McCall** I do find that it's possible. And I think meal prepping can be another terminology that's a little bit intimidating. And sometimes we think meal prep is the matching containers that are all labeled Monday through Friday, stocked perfectly in our perfectly clean fridges. And that's just not a reality for all of us. But I like to educate in batch cooking over the weekend or whenever you have some more time. Pick one to two proteins, one to two starches that you can cook large quantities, but then you can mix and match it.

So you're not eating the same thing. One night, you can make a burrito bowl with some shredded chicken and some rice. And then the next day you take some of that chicken and turn it into a wrap. Easy ways that you can mix some flavors through that batch cooking is how I like to teach about meal prepping just to make it feel a little less intimidating.

[00:14:54] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I tell people that if you chop veggies for the week, first of all, you're more likely to eat them by far, but also that is prepping, and it can take you very far in your week.

[00:15:06] **Beth McCall** Yeah, I have a three-year-old and. I see that difference even just in him of if he helps with the meal or maybe pick the tomatoes out of the garden or something like that, he's going to eat them more than if I just put them on his plate.

[00:15:15] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Yeah, there is research to show that. I think if kids have a say in what is chosen at the garden or in the grocery store, and if they have a say in the choices and the prep, they're more likely to participate. Before we continue, this episode is brought to you by Orgain. As we've covered today, sometimes fueling happens on the go. And in those moments, if you need a simple option on the way out the door Orgain's Nutrition Shakes are a great choice. They come in dairy and plant-based options. Both have 16 grams of protein, are USDA certified organic, and are packed with vitamins and minerals. They taste amazing. And come in plenty of flavors, so it's easy to find something you or your teen will love. Find it at orgain.com. Beth has so many practical tools up her sleeve. From her car analogy to her gold medal snacks, she makes nutrition approachable. That's really the goal, isn't it? We build lifelong skills by breaking down complex concepts into something teens can understand, and then give them the space to learn as they go. This is why I'm so happy we talked about finding ways to involve young people in their own food choices. Shared education is how healthy teens become healthy adults. As we continue this conversation, Beth and I will shift into the more emotional side of adolescent nutrition. The changes teens go through aren't just physical, and the way we talk about food, body, and performance can land deeply at this age. With that said, I want to address a request that I and a lot of other dietitians often get on this topic. There have been times when parents or supporters come to me with the goal of weight loss for their kids, whether they're preteens or teens. While it always comes from a place of care, the pressure that can come with a goal like that can sometimes lead to negative downstream effects, like kids feeling monitored around food or even developing disordered patterns. So when I'm approached with this question, my aim is to reframe the health goal. At that young of an age, dietitians are generally not going to put a teen on a restrictive diet. Instead, we focus on building the foundations of a positive

relationship with food, working together to uncover doable habits, even if that starts as simply as helping them find a type of physical activity that they genuinely enjoy. Let's jump back in. You mentioned this a little bit in the beginning regarding under-fueling or showing up at sports and having your body be broken or injured. How would you define the concept of under-fueling? What does that mean when we talk about it to you?

[00:18:22] **Beth McCall** In the most basic terms of you're not getting enough of what your body is outputting. Our bodies are smart, they're gonna tell us that, and they're going to use what we are taking for the most essential functions, which is why we start to see it show up in some of those other ways. And unfortunately, performance for your sport isn't what your bodies thinks is one of the most essential functions that it needs to do. So you're gonna see that start to lack.

[00:18:42] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I think about under-fueling in a big way as lack of calories or just energy, but could under-fueling also be you're not getting enough carbohydrates or protein or fat?

[00:18:52] **Beth McCall** Totally. We see that mostly in carbohydrate, but just simply because it is such the main source of energy for your muscles and the only source for your brain. That's the biggest macronutrient that we see, but it could be any of those.

[00:19:04] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** What are some early signs that a teen might be under-fueling or developing an unhealthy relationship with food?

[00:19:12] **Beth McCall** Unfortunately, under-fueling can be hard to pin down. It can show up in a variety of ways. So it can show up in performance, it can up in their mood, in certain health markers, behaviorally. If possible for parents, coaches, whomever is around the athlete, it's so important to know these signs and to try to catch it early. Sometimes the under-fueling isn't intentional. They just simply don't know how much their body needs, but then other times it is intentional, and could be an underlying growing unhealthy relationship with food or body, exercise, all of the above. Some early signs to look out for are they're constantly fatigued, they're getting sick more easily or certain kind of recurring injuries, even dizziness, headaches, something that you might think is they're just simply sick could actually be related to how much they're taking in. And then you start to see some of the further declining performance, recurring injuries. They're cold all the time. Maybe they have GI issues, and then unfortunately the female athletes, menstrual cycle disruption or a delay. And if we get to that point, that's possibly been going on for quite some time. Outside of the physical signs, there's also behavioral ones. You're noticing athletes

skipping meals or making rigid rules for themselves, and then they're blaming it on their sport. I need to do this to run faster or to jump higher or they're maybe having such a new obsession for healthy foods. And that could be a good thing, but are they getting overly obsessed with it? Those are some of the key ones that I like to have parents and coaches perk their ears up too.

[00:20:35] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** If a parent thinks that a teen might be under fueling, how do you suggest they start the conversation in a way that's really compassionate and mindful of language?

[00:20:44] **Beth McCall** Leading with curiosity, leading with care, trying to focus on just energy, recovery, things that really speak to the child, definitely not focusing on size or trying to avoid comments that are around weight or shape or if you're noticing they're eating too little or too much, don't tell them to simply eat more or eat less, because oftentimes it's not that easy. Maybe some helpful conversation starters. I've noticed that you seem a little bit more tired lately. And a little bit less like yourself. How are you feeling? You're approaching it that way and not even necessarily bringing food into the picture immediately, but questions that might help lead your child there.

[00:21:23] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** The parental role is critical, of course, but parents don't have to do this alone. There's amazing practitioners like you, there's therapists and coaches. Who else is on the support team for this challenge?

[00:21:35] **Beth McCall** Some of it is right there around the kid, the parents and the coaches, teachers. I had a teacher in the past that was really pivotal in this that actually spoke to my mom before with certain things that she was noticing about me in the classroom. So those are the care team that's immediately surrounding a kid at this younger age, but then bringing in a broader medical team of obviously the physician and then seeking out help from dietitian, a therapist would be involved in a medical team depending upon the level of this different layer of support

[00:22:05] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It's not one size fits all. It needs to be individualized to the child and their sport and the situation. I do have a question about dietary supplements with young athletes. This is a really hot topic and that could be anything from an herb to a powder to a multivitamin. You can walk into the store and just grab them off the shelf. So how do you approach that?

[00:22:27] **Beth McCall** The supplement world is loud, so it can get a little intimidating. Especially for youth, I'm always going to take food first approach, basics first, and safety first. For the most part, even youth should be able to get

all that they need from food if their diet is well-rounded enough, but especially in those really heavy growth periods, multivitamin may be necessary. As long as it's the right one, it's not going to hurt anything. But the basics that we need to make sure we're before we think about any supplements is am I getting consistent meals? Are they hydrating? We haven't talked a ton about micronutrients, but some of the most key ones of, are we getting enough iron-rich and calcium-rich foods? What are those foods? And then getting adequate sleep. If beyond that, if we've checked all those boxes and we're still considering a supplement, ask yourself like, what problem are we trying to solve? What gap are we're trying to fill? And can that be filled with food or with lifestyle habits? And then if the answer is no, then obviously consulting a medical professional, a dietitian, somebody with the knowledge before you just give your child anything so they can make sure that it's safe, that it is research, third party tested to be free of any harmful substances. So there's a huge growing wealth of knowledge of supplements but not a ton of that research has been done in youth. We're checking to make sure first, is it necessary, are we doing everything that we can through food and then getting the right consultation about it.

[00:23:47] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** The right consultation is a great point because what if they're low in vitamin D? A lot of this we need to base on testing. You mentioned iron. Some kids are much higher at risk to be low in iron. It has all these side effects being fatigued or cold. But what are the levels? Is that the issue? There could be an element of testing here and personalization. The other thing that I find complicated if you're a nutrition nerd like us is the micronutrients, so the vitamins and minerals for males and females constantly change as you go up the age bracket in kids and teens. So it's this moving target of where are they now and what are their needs.

[00:24:26] **Beth McCall** That could be an area where maybe they were getting enough through food, but now they've gone through this growth spurt, and they're a little bit older or they started menstruating, and they are not getting enough now and those levels have gone down.

[00:24:35] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** One thing I love about your work is you take this functional approach and that includes yoga and breath work and mindfulness. So I'm interested in how you connect mind body work even in kids at a young age.

[00:24:51] **Beth McCall** It's so fun for me. Yoga, breathwork, mindfulness, they're all proven and really well researched to help youth build body awareness, build confidence, stress regulation. And I like to make it simple. I don't teach traditional studio yoga as it is, mine's athletic yoga, but then I've also

had the extra training in breathwork, and I'll use simple exercises that help athletes from a performance standpoint, such as calming pre-competition nerves, strengthening their focus in the classroom or in practice, but then also simple yoga stretches that can help restore tired muscles, pairing that with some education on recovery nutrition. And then in the concept of more mindful eating or a positive relationship with food, you can also bring some mindfulness and breath work into teaching hunger fullness cues. I think depending upon either the athlete or the group that I'm working with, you can really tailor the use of some yoga movements and mindfulness to tailor it to where they're at, and then bringing the nutrition piece in into it as well.

[00:25:48] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** What a cool connection. Do you feel like kids and teens are into it? Does it go over well with them?

[00:25:55] **Beth McCall** It depends upon the way you present it. Sometimes I don't frame it as yoga. They're thinking that I have to be super flexible in order to do this. And that's not the case. Sometimes that breath work, getting them to just simply slow down is also really hard. But I think if the parents and the coaches are bought in, they're the ones that are bringing me in anyways, that definitely helps.

[00:26:12] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** As we wrap up, I'm wondering if you could share one message to take the pressure off of a listening parent who's stressed about doing everything right. What do you want them to hear?

[00:26:26] **Beth McCall** You don't need to be perfect. One small habit can really go such a long way. If your kid's not eating breakfast, and they start to eat breakfast even twice a week, that's a win. We just need to find a few consistent anchors that can help set their environment up for success that will take them such a long way, and eventually you'll start to see them take ownership of those new anchors, and then you can pull in another one.

[00:26:48] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** That's such a big takeaway for me. And what I heard today is eat dinner. It doesn't have to be perfect, but eating dinner is better than not. Or it's great to have a gold medal snack and have it be balanced. But at the end of the day, an unbalanced snack is still the fuel that you need. So it doesn't to be be perfect is an amazing place to wrap up for today. I feel so good after this conversation with Beth. If you asked me to highlight the recurring theme here, I would have an easy answer for you. It's flexibility. Take her point on yoga, for example. It's not what you suggest, but how you frame it. Maybe your young athlete isn't excited about the term yoga, but they will try a quick reset that helps them feel calmer and more in control. Same benefit, different message. And really, that's the heart of it. When you find creative ways to make

room for flexibility, life gets a little easier. That might mean some meal prep, some meals out or the occasional treat after a game well played. When a teen sees you embracing that variety, doing your best, and being flexible, that's where the real lessons land. So I'll leave you with this. Think back to your 13-year-old self. I have a feeling they'd be pretty grateful to have you in their corner now. I'm Dr. Ginger Hultin. Thank you so much for joining me today. And if you enjoyed this episode, share it with another parent on your kid's team or in your network. Who knows, you might even work on some of these strategies together. Until next time.

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