

NUTRITION KNOWLEDGE, BELIEFS, AND DIETARY PRACTICES IN AFRICAN FOOTBALL



A Cross-Sectional Study of Adolescent
African Football Players

CAF African Schools Football
Championship - Zonal tournaments



Introduction

The **CAF** African Schools Football Championship was officially launched in 2022 by the CAF President Dr Patrice Motsepe with the purpose to exploit the opportunities within the values of football to holistically develop African boys and girls.

This brochure highlights one critical area of that development: **Sports Nutrition Education**. Nutrition is a foundational pillar of athletic growth, especially for young footballers. School-aged athletes need balanced, nutrient-rich diets to sustain energy, build and repair muscles, and recover effectively after training and matches.

CAF is pleased to present the **second edition of its research work**, conducted during the **Zonal Union phase of the 2024/2025 CAF African**

Schools Football Championship.

This research explores the connection between nutrition knowledge and performance in young athletes, recognizing that dietary choices are closely linked to an athlete's understanding of nutrition.

Football is a high-intensity sport that requires proper nutrition to enhance performance, recovery, and overall health. However, athletes' dietary choices are influenced by their knowledge of sports nutrition, making it essential to assess their habits, attitudes, and behaviours. This is especially crucial for adolescent players, as nutrition impacts both their football performance and long-term development.

Yet, most research on adolescent sports nutrition does not focus on

African football players, limiting its relevance to African football policy and practice.

In response, the **CAF Research Hub** undertook this study to assess the **nutrition knowledge, attitudes, and practices** of adolescent African football players, as well as the coaches, support staff, and match officials who influence their development. This initiative aims to inform strategies that improve sports nutrition education and contribute to the well-being and performance of young athletes across the continent.

Demographic data of the research population



Sports nutrition knowledge among young African football players

57.6%

The average number of participants who were unable to correctly identify the relative amounts of carbohydrates in the foods above.

54% – 70%

Many participants did not know or were unsure whether various food sources contained low, medium, or high amounts of fat.

+70%

Majority of participants did not know or were unsure of the relative amounts of protein in common foods such as beans, apples, margarine and peanuts.

80%

Most participants were unsure or incorrectly believed that players should rely on a fixed (arbitrary) amount of fluid rather than to develop a personalized fluid replacement plan based on their individual sweat rate.

55%

Participants who were unable to identify the optimal pre-meal timeframe of 2 to 3 hours before football activity, while only 28% correctly recognized that the optimal time to eat after a session is within 1 hour of its conclusion.

Majority of the participants lacked correct knowledge of key nutrition fundamentals aligning with other studies that show sports nutrition knowledge among athletes and support personnel is generally poor to adequate. This gap can lead to poor dietary choices, which negatively impact performance, recovery, and overall health.

Key Recommendation for Member Associations

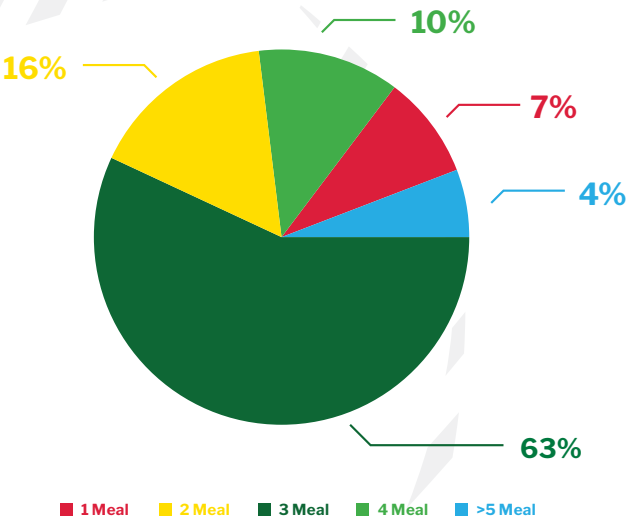
The Member Associations must ensure that schools, affiliated clubs, and academies regularly organize sports nutrition workshops for schoolboys and girls and support personnel at sports tournaments and other events. Additionally, multimodal resources like infographics and video abstracts should be developed to enhance knowledge dissemination in schools and the broader football ecosystem. These materials should also guide players

on identifying reliable and accurate nutrition information online. The World Food Programme (WFP) can play a vital role in supporting the nutrition of schoolboys and girls involved in football by providing balanced, energy-rich meals through school feeding programs tailored to athletic needs. WFP can also offer nutrition education focused on sports performance, hydration, and recovery, empowering young athletes to make informed food choices.

Nutritional Intake and Its Impact on schoolboys and girls in Africa

Around 70% of participants reported daily consumption of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins, though girls had lower intake of protein and fruits/vegetables.

Only 4% followed the recommended five-meal plan for athletes, while 63% ate three meals a day. Frequent consumption of sweetened beverages and fast foods was also high among schoolboys and girls, posing risks to performance and long-term health. Research studies have shown that undernutrition during adolescence can lead to deficiencies, poor growth, and compromised football performance, emphasizing the need for improved dietary education and access to balanced nutrition.



Key Recommendation for Member Associations

Given the influence of undernutrition on educational outcomes and football performance, CAF Member Associations must engage with relevant government ministries and other affiliated organizations to encourage the development of programs to provide meals such as breakfast or a healthy snack within the school system or youth football programs. This would help adolescents meet World Health Organization (WHO) dietary guidelines and mitigate the risk of undernutrition and its consequences.

Attitude and dietary beliefs of African Schoolboys and girls

Nearly 70% of participants reported daily consumption of carbohydrates, proteins, and micronutrient-rich foods such as milk, eggs, fruits, and vegetables. However, intake of fruits and vegetables was often below recommended levels, potentially leading to deficiencies in essential vitamins and minerals. Such deficiencies can negatively impact player health and key performance factors, including energy production, muscle development, and recovery. Additionally, 65% of participants reported regular consumption of

fast food, sweetened beverages, and sweets. According to current World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, carbohydrates should provide up to 65% of total energy intake, proteins up to 35%, and individuals should consume at least five portions of fruits and vegetables daily.

Similar trends have been observed globally, where football players often consume enough protein and fat but lack essential vitamins and minerals.



Key Recommendation for Member Associations

Sports nutrition knowledge resources that we develop should also be relevant to and disseminated to players' parents or guardians, who have a huge influence on the dietary choices of players. With the teams, coaches or PE teachers can encourage group challenges or games focused on trying new healthy foods and debunking food

myths. Member Association and schools should educate parents about positive reinforcement at home and respecting children's food preferences while guiding them. Any activities should tackle beliefs that certain foods are "only for boys" or "only for girls" through inclusive education.



Sources of nutrition information for African schoolboys and girls

The internet and social media were the most widely used sources of sports nutrition information among participants, though their reliability is often questionable due to potential commercial biases. As commonly observed as well, many participants also stated that reliance on their coaches and families for guidance. Best practices should include involving coaches and families in nutrition education while equipping players with the skills to identify credible online sources.



Key Recommendation

Coach education should include modules on sports nutrition to allow them to deliver accurate sports nutrition knowledge. Member Associations should collaborate with ministries of health and education, and NGOs to ensure accurate, culturally relevant information. CAF Member Associations should promote national school feeding programs with embedded nutrition education. Further during youth competitions, the Federation should display posters, charts, and food pyramids and work with CAF to provide age-appropriate booklets



Conclusion

Proper nutrition plays a critical role in the development and performance of young athletes. For schoolboys and girls involved in football, a well-balanced diet is essential not only for maintaining good health and well-being but also for supporting energy demands, physical endurance, and post-exercise recovery. Overall, the findings of this study show that in order to promote health, well-being, and optimise football performance, it is important that football players and those who support them are provided with opportunities to learn more about general and sports nutrition knowledge, to enable them to improve their sports nutrition knowledge and dietary practices.

To address this, it is recommended that:

- Nutrition education programs be integrated into school sports curricula.
- Workshops for coaches, parents, and athletes be organized in partnership with health professionals.
- Organizations like the World Food Programme (WFP) and ministries of education work collaboratively to provide nutrient-rich meals tailored for active students.
- Culturally relevant materials be developed to dispel food myths and promote the value of local, affordable, and nutritious foods.

For more information on this study, kindly
contact **The CAF Research Hub:**
cafresearchhub@cafonline.com