

Ausdance National

FACT SHEET

Nutrition for Young Dancers

What this Fact Sheet covers

General nutrition principles for young dancers to support development, recovery, bone health and performance.

Who this is for?

Young dancers, parents and carers, dance teachers, studio owners and youth dance program coordinators.

Why this matters

Sufficient energy intake is essential for bone health, immune function, growth, performance and injury prevention. Nutrition is part of safe dance practice — not separate from it. Low energy availability is one of the most significant and under-recognised risks to young dancers' health and success.

At a glance

- Sufficient energy intake is essential for bone health, immune function, growth, performance and injury prevention.
- Carbohydrates are important for performance, muscle recovery and brain function.
- Refuelling after classes and conditioning should be actively encouraged by teachers and guardians.
- Low energy availability affects young dancers' health, growth and long-term success.

Energy availability — fuelling for success

Energy out needs to be met by energy in. This is particularly important for young dancers, as growth itself consumes significant energy. To support growth and development, young performers must eat not only enough food, but a variety of foods.

Signs of under-fuelling

Watch for the following indicators that a young dancer may not be meeting their energy needs:

- Frequent tiredness, dizziness or poor concentration
- Frequent illness
- Repeated injury, poor recovery or stress fractures
- Irregular periods
- Low iron
- Behaviours such as skipping meals or reliance on supplements in place of food

If you have concerns about a young dancer's energy intake, encourage families to seek advice from a GP or Accredited Practising Dietitian.

The role of different foods

Carbohydrates

The body's main source of energy. Carbohydrates are essential for brain health — the brain, while only 2% of total body mass, consumes approximately 20% of our glucose. Insufficient carbohydrate intake can result in reduced performance, early fatigue, impaired brain function and slower muscle recovery.

Protein

The building blocks of muscle. Protein is important for growth and development, and essential for muscle recovery after dancing. Every body is different — as a general starting point, 1.5–2.0g of protein per kilogram of body weight per day is commonly cited for active young people. Seek advice from an Accredited Sports Dietitian for individual guidance.

Fats

Healthy fats are essential for brain function, hormonal health and key body processes. They also help moderate spikes in blood sugar, supporting sustained energy across long dance classes. Sources include avocado, nuts, seeds, oily fish and olive oil.

Micronutrients

Vitamins and minerals are needed in small amounts to keep bones and muscles healthy and to support organ function and immune health. A variety of whole foods — including plants, seeds, nuts and legumes — helps ensure adequate micronutrient intake.

Supplements

Most young dancers do not need supplements if they are eating well and varied. Supplements are most useful when specific deficiencies have been identified by a health professional. Young performers should always seek advice from a GP, Accredited Practising Dietitian or Accredited Sports Dietitian before adding supplements to their routine.

Tips for classes and competition days

Pack snacks and refuel after training

Have a quick snack ready to eat after dancing — a combination of protein and carbohydrate-rich foods is ideal for recovery. Plan ahead so that food is available immediately after class, not hours later.

Performance and competition days

Nerves can make it harder to eat enough. Easily digestible options — such as pancakes, white rice or white bread with a protein source — can help maintain energy when appetite is low.

First Nations considerations

Nutrition for First Nations young dancers must be understood in the context of food access, food sovereignty and the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and food cultures.

Food insecurity is a significant reality for many First Nations families. The 2022–23 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey found that 42% of First Nations households experienced food insecurity at some point in the preceding 12 months. In remote communities, access to fresh, affordable, nutritious food can be severely limited by geography, cost and availability. Advice about nutrition that assumes ready access to a full range of fresh and affordable foods may be unrealistic for some First Nations families, and teachers should be sensitive to this without making assumptions about individual students.

Traditional First Nations foods — including native fruits, vegetables, seeds, fish and lean game meats — are nutritionally dense and have sustained communities across this continent and these islands for tens of thousands of years. There is growing evidence that diets incorporating traditional foods support better health outcomes for First Nations people. Studios and programs working with First Nations communities should not frame Western dietary guidelines as the only valid nutritional approach.

Iron deficiency is prevalent among First Nations young people and can significantly affect energy, concentration, physical performance and recovery — all directly relevant to dance participation. Teachers who notice signs of persistent fatigue, poor concentration or slow recovery in First Nations students should encourage families to seek assessment from a GP.

Nutrition advice in dance settings should never include commentary about body size, weight or appearance. This is harmful for all students, and particularly so for First Nations young people, who may already be navigating harmful stereotypes and have a complex relationship with health messaging framed around negativity.

Guidance for teachers and studios

- Promote healthy, neutral messages about food and energy — food is fuel and nourishment, not reward or punishment.
- Encourage dancers to eat and drink regularly around classes and performances.
- Do not provide prescriptive diet advice — this is outside the scope of practice of a dance teacher. Instead, share reputable resources and refer families to an Accredited Practising Dietitian or Accredited Sports Dietitian where needed.
- Avoid appearance-based or weight-based comments.
- Encourage families to seek advice from a GP, Accredited Practising Dietitian, or Accredited Sports Dietitian where concerns arise.
- Recognise that nutrition is part of safe dance practice, not separate from it.

Resources

Ausdance resources

Eating disorders and dancers: ausdance.org.au

Fuelling the dancer: ausdance.org.au

Safe Dance Practice: ausdance.org.au

Additional resources

Dietitians Australia — plant-based milks and nutrition guidance: dietitiansaustralia.org.au

Australian Institute of Sport — nutrition resources, recipes and modules: ais.gov.au

Wellbeing for Dancers — food sources and practical resources: wellbeingfordancers.com.au

The Australian Ballet Body Image and Disordered Eating Guidelines: australianballet.com.au

The Butterfly Foundation (eating disorder support): butterfly.org.au — 1800 ED HOPE (1800 33 4673)

AIHW — Health and wellbeing of First Nations people: aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/indigenous-health-and-wellbeing

Creative Australia — Living Culture (arts and wellbeing): creative.gov.au/research/living-culture-first-nations-arts-participation-and-wellbeing

Reconciliation Australia — Reconciliation Action Plans: reconciliation.org.au

eSafety Commissioner — First Nations resources: esafety.gov.au

13YARN (24/7 crisis support for First Nations people): 13 92 76

Australian Public Service Commission — Cultural Load: apsc.gov.au

ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2022–23: abs.gov.au

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey 2023: abs.gov.au

Professional support

GP — general health assessment and referral

Accredited Practising Dietitian or Accredited Sports Dietitian — individualised nutrition advice

Paediatrician or Sports Physician — growth and development concerns

Psychologist or mental health professional — where disordered eating or mental health concerns are present

This fact sheet provides general information only. It is not medical, dietetic or clinical advice. Individual nutrition needs vary according to age, growth, health status, training load and other factors. Always refer families to a qualified health professional for individualised guidance. Ausdance Fact Sheet updates 2026 have been completed by Rita Pryce, Ashley Saltner Jr, Tom Davis, Annie Strauchs, Lynette Haines, Dr Joanna Nicholas, Ellen Paterniti, Isaac Campbell, Peta Blevins, Jacqueline Dimmock and Molly Tipping. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and Cultural Guidance – Rita Pryce, Pryce Centre for Culture and Arts.