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CONTENT

ECONOMIC SCIENCES

Babunashvili E., Kipiani M.
GEORGIA'S NATIONAL POTENTIAL - A PREREQUISITE FOR A DECENT INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP 4

Bibilashvili L.
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: INSIGHTS FROM THE UNITED NATIONS AI FOR GOOD GLOBAL SUMMIT 6

Svetlin Minev
SECTOR HETEROGENEITY IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORPORATE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE AND ESG RATINGS OF PUBLIC COMPANIES: A SECTOR-LEVEL REGRESSION ANALYSIS 9

Verigo A.
DEVELOPMENT OF APPROACHES TO THE MANAGEMENT OF THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM (USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY SECTOR).....13

Orjonikidze N., Zhozhuashvili N.
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL TOURISM AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA 18

MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

Frasser C.E.
TOWARD GENERAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF *K*-GEODETIC GRAPHS: STRUCTURAL FOUNDATIONS, ALGORITHMIC CHALLENGES, AND EMERGING RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....22

MEDICAL SCIENCES

Angelcheva M.
THE WELLNESS CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: CULTURAL AND HEALTH PERSPECTIVES 25

Asadova K., Alosmanova V., Azizova S.
THE ECOBİOLOGY OF MEDİCİNAL PLANTS USED İN THE TREATMENT OF ORAL DİSEASES 30

PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

Chipeva M.
WELLNESS AND NUTRITION AS DETERMINANTS OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE 33

SOCIAL SCIENCIES

Dimitrova Bistra
HEALTH PREVENTION IN AQUATIC ENVIRONMENT..38

Tomova T.
CUPPING THERAPY: TYPES, FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES, AND EVIDENCE-BASED APPLICATION TECHNIQUES.....43

TECHNICAL SCIENCES

Amariei Olga-Ioana, Hamat Codruța-Oana, Georgevici Gabriela-Felicia, Chicheș Marian
STATISTICAL MODELING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTALLED CAPACITY AND EXPORTED POWER: A CASE STUDY FROM THE BANAT REGION .49

Ildırımzade Yusif
OPTIMIZATION OF DYNAMIC OBSTACLE AVOIDANCE ALGORITHMS FOR AUTONOMOUS MOBILE ROBOTS ON UNEVEN TERRAIN.....57

Yernur Demessin, Darkhan Zholtayev
EVALUATION OF KNOWLEDGE GRAPH INTEGRATION IN LLM-BASED FINANCIAL CHATBOTS 61

VETERINARY SCIENCES

Gerilovych A., Korovin I., Vashchyk Ye.
PCR-BASED DETECTION OF AUJESZKY'S DISEASE VIRUS (SUID ALPHAHERPESVIRUS 1) USING EVAGREEN REAL-TIME PCR ASSAY 68

PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

WELLNESS AND NUTRITION AS DETERMINANTS OF SPORTS PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Nutrition is a key determinant of athlete health, recovery, and sports performance, influencing the metabolic and physiological adaptations required for training. This review examines the relationship between wellness, nutrition, and athletic performance, emphasizing nutrient absorption, food composition, and personalized dietary strategies. Evidence-based nutritional assessment, including dietary recalls, food frequency questionnaires, supplementation studies, and individualized nutrition plans, is discussed in relation to recovery and performance outcomes. Attention is given to the role of macronutrients, micronutrients, and ergogenic aids, including creatine, beta-alanine, and omega-3 fatty acids, in enhancing exercise adaptation. The findings highlight that optimal performance requires a holistic approach integrating nutrition, adequate recovery and individualised dietary management. Personalised nutrition is essential for improving health, maximizing performance, and supporting long-term athletic development.

Keywords: sports nutrition; performance; nutrient absorption; personalised wellness.

Introduction

Nutrition fundamental component of sports training, deserving special attention and becoming foundational from a very early age for every athlete (1, 6, 8). It aims to optimally supply the body with nutrients, which is why it is associated with adhering to several essential principles of athlete nutrition (4, 5, 15). These principles are mainly derived from rational and healthy eating and aim to maintain excellent athletic shape and good health (9, 19, 21). Proper nutrition directly influences the enhancement of body capacity, abilities, and sports performance. Understanding the principles of dietetics that aid in developing an athlete is crucial for achieving high results. Becoming a good athlete is not about spending one or two hours at the stadium or in the gym but about maintaining a 24-hour regimen for the body (10, 13, 22). For this reason, the athlete must be responsible for their performance—diet, sleep, recovery, behavior, and attitude towards the training and competitive process (3, 9, 14). Physical labor and regular sports activities boost self-esteem towards better motivation and willpower, better time management, and more rational achievement of daily goals (2, 20, 23). Nutrition is a fundamental aspect of athletic training, requiring special attention, and is crucial from an early age for every athlete (11, 15, 17). Before embarking on the path of professional sports, children and their parents must carefully evaluate whether they can endure the demands of this challenging journey, as the work is grueling, the sacrifices are significant (7, 11, 16). The competition in modern elite sports is fierce (12, 18). Reaching the pinnacle of a sports career requires substantial sacrifices, which not everyone is willing to make. In Bulgaria, nutrition is not well integrated into both youth and professional sports. There is an overemphasis on training, exertion, and training methods, while recovery takes a backseat, often relying on traditional methods such as massage and sauna. Sleep also tends to be underestimated.

Methods

Nutritional Assessment: Dietary needs personalised analysis of Food diaries and Dietary recall: Collect detailed information on athletes' dietary habits through 24-hour dietary recalls or food frequency questionnaires. Analyse the data for macronutrient and micronutrient intake, caloric distribution, and adherence to recommended dietary guidelines

*Nutritional Intervention Trials: C*ontrolled feeding trials Implements tightly controlled dietary interventions where athletes consume predesigned meals tailored to specific performance goals. Monitor their effects on physiological and psychological outcomes.

Supplementation Studies: Investigate the role of specific supplements (e.g., creatine, beta-alanine, omega-3 fatty acids) in enhancing recovery, reducing traumatism or improving endurance.

Customized Nutrition Plans: Tailor diets based on individual athlete needs, genetic predispositions, and sports demands. Evaluate outcomes to refine personalized nutrition strategies.

Results

Nutrition is a fundamental determinant of physiological function, athletic performance, recovery, and long-term health. Evidence indicates that a balanced dietary intake, comprising appropriate proportions of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and adequate hydration, is essential for optimizing metabolic processes and reducing injury risk (17, 18). Nutritional strategies should be individualized according to the biomechanical, physiological, and energetic demands of specific sports, considering factors such as endurance, strength, power, and intermittent exercise characteristics. Athlete-specific variables, including body composition, metabolic profile, playing position, age, and training objectives, should also inform dietary planning. The judicious use of evidence-based dietary supplements may further support performance and re-

covery when tailored to individual requirements. Conversely, excessive consumption of highly processed foods rich in saturated fats, refined sugars, preservatives, and additives may impair metabolic efficiency and compromise athletic adaptation. Therefore, priority should be given to nutrient-dense foods, including lean proteins, fish, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and healthy fats, which provide the substrates necessary for energy production, tissue repair, immune function, and physiological resilience. Nutrient timing should likewise reflect sport-specific demands, with carbohydrate availability optimized for high-intensity and explosive activities, whereas endurance disciplines may require greater reliance on fat metabolism. Team sports characterized by intermittent exercise patterns require balanced nutritional approaches that support both aerobic and anaerobic energy systems. Effective nutritional management should be delivered through an interdisciplinary framework involving dietitians, physicians, psychologists, exercise physiologists, and coaches. Such collaboration enables individualized nutritional interventions that enhance performance, accelerate recovery, support injury prevention, and promote sustainable athlete development throughout the competitive career.

1. **Athlete's Weight**: An athlete's body weight is influenced by genetics, lifestyle, environment, social conditions, family background, and education. Maintaining and achieving an optimal weight is a personal priority linked to persistence, motivation, willpower, and mental stability. In many sports, maintaining optimal or low weight is crucial, often requiring changes in diet and strict adherence to healthy eating principles.

2. **Simplicity Daily, Variety Weekly and Monthly**: Breakfasts, lunches, and dinners should be consistent in composition to ensure proper digestion and nutrient absorption. This approach aligns with the concept of balanced eating. An athlete's daily menu should provide the necessary energy and contain a proper balance of nutrients, vitamins, and trace elements. The challenge in preparing weekly and monthly menus is ensuring the food is diverse, high-energy, and balanced.

3. **Breakfast**: It should be consumed at least two hours before the morning workout and primarily consist of carbohydrates to provide energy. It may include warm drinks like tea and milk, sweetened with a spoonful of sugar or honey. Pre-workout meals should be concentrated, high-calorie, easily digestible, and small in volume, rich in carbohydrates and vitamins. Breakfast should account for about 25-30% of daily intake. If there's an afternoon snack, it should be light, comprising about 10% of the day's food.

4. **Lunch**: This depends on the athlete's training schedule. If lunch is after a workout, it should include a larger quantity of food (40-45% of daily intake) with higher protein, fat, and mineral content. If lunch precedes training, it should be smaller (30-35% of daily intake), with more carbohydrates and easily digestible food.

5. **Dinner**: Dinner should be protein-rich and eaten before 7:30 PM. If the sport requires muscle mass gain, an additional protein product can be consumed 1-2 hours after dinner. A high-protein dinner is based on the idea that amino acids are better absorbed during sleep when growth hormone is secreted in larger amounts. In a three-meal day, dinner should comprise 25-30% of total food intake, or 20-25% if there's an afternoon snack. If the athlete has a workout or event in the afternoon, dinner should be at least an hour after and should make up 25-30% of the daily intake.

6. **Composition of Food**: Nutrition should provide the body with all essential nutrients: proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidant compounds. If the athlete needs to follow a low-energy diet, energy intake is reduced primarily from fats and carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates: These are the body's primary fuel. The body stores carbohydrates as glycogen in the muscles and liver. During intense training, this glycogen is depleted, and the body starts drawing energy from body fats and proteins. Excess sugar can lead to conversion into fats. Hence, it's important to maintain an optimal carbohydrate intake. This amount should be sufficient to replenish the body's glycogen stores and support performance during physical activity. Endurance athletes have the greatest need for carbohydrates, while gymnasts and weightlifters require the least (tab. 1).

Table 1.

Nutrition for Athletes, by IOC, 2021 standards.

Training Load	Description of Load	Carbohydrate Intake
Light	Low-intensity activities or activities requiring specific skills	3-5 g/kg/day
Moderate	Moderately intensive programs (around 1 hour daily)	5-7 g/kg/day
High	Endurance programs (1-3 hours/day of moderate to high intensity)	6-10 g/kg/day
Very High	Extremely high loads (4-5 hours/day of moderate to high intensity)	8-12 g/kg/day

These are the primary building blocks of the body. They form muscle tissue and contribute to the construction of structural proteins and enzymes. For athletes focusing on strength development and muscle building, proteins are a key component. This can be effective only with the right combination of high protein intake and substances that support anabolic processes. In sports nutrition, not only the quantity but also the quality of proteins is crucial, meaning they should contain all the essential amino acids necessary for the human body, integral to nerve tissue, hormones, and more. The more trained an organism is, the more effectively and quickly it utilizes fats for energy needs. Athletes like marathon runners, cyclists, ski jumpers, and swimmers have the highest fat requirements. It is recommended to

reduce animal fats to 10%, with the remainder coming from dairy, fish, and plant sources (tab. 2).

Table 2.

Protein Nutrition for Athletes, in accordance with the motor intensity by IOC, 2021 standards.

Training Load	Protein Intake
Low physical activity	0.8 g/kg/day
Regular training program	1.0 g/kg/day
Endurance sports with intensive training program	1.2-1.6 g/kg/day
Endurance sports with very intensive or competitive training program	2.0 g/kg/day
Strength sports with intensive training program	1.2-1.7 g/kg/day
Young athletes	2.0 g/kg/day

Vitamins and Minerals: These are essential for the proper functioning of the body's metabolism. They are crucial for the correct operation of all organs and systems; deficiency can lead to imbalances and metabolic issues. Therefore, food should contain adequate vitamins and minerals, mainly sourced from fresh fruits and vegetables. Sports activities significantly increase the demand for these substances, and often they are supplemented through dietary supplements.

7. **Fluid Intake**: Water is necessary for all biochemical processes in the body. To maintain optimal physical condition, proper hydration is crucial. Athletes should drink fluids before, during, and after physical exertion to stay well-hydrated. The amount of fluid intake should be carefully adjusted according to physical activity, air temperature, and other factors influencing fluid loss.

8. **Eating Fruits on an Empty Stomach**: Due to their tendency to ferment quickly, fruits are best consumed half an hour to an hour before meals. Vegetables and salads should be eaten during main meals and seasoned with olive oil.

9. **Combining Foods**: There are various theories about food combinations, ranging from those that completely exclude combining certain foods to those that advocate mixing many different foods. Rational nutrition combines hard-to-digest foods with vegetables and spices for easier digestion. While there is no scientific evidence of chemical incompatibility between different foods, there is evidence of nutrient competition during absorption, such as fats hindering glucose transport, sugars interfering with fat absorption, and two types of sugars competing with each other.

10. **Self-Control**: This is a crucial factor for all athletic success. An athlete's diet is an element of their personal freedom, but to achieve high sports performance, they must adhere to a specific regime and principles.

Discussion

Nutrition plays a critical role in the performance, recovery, and overall health of athletes. A well-designed nutrition plan tailored to the specific demands of an athlete's sport, training intensity, and individual physiology can enhance performance, reduce the risk of injuries, and promote long-term well-being. This discussion highlights key nutritional considerations for athletes, focusing on macronutrient balance, hydration, supplementation, and timing of nutrient intake.

Macronutrient Requirements

1. *Carbohydrates:* Carbohydrates serve as the primary energy source for athletes, particularly during high-intensity and endurance activities. Adequate carbohydrate intake supports glycogen replenishment, delays fatigue and improves endurance performance. For athletes engaging in light, moderate, or high-intensity training, carbohydrate needs vary between 3-12 g/kg/day, depending on the duration and intensity of activity. Insufficient carbohydrate intake can lead to reduced glycogen stores, resulting in diminished performance and delayed recovery.

2. *Proteins:* Proteins are essential for muscle repair, recovery, and growth. Athletes require higher protein intakes than the general population, ranging from 1.2-2.0 g/kg/day depending on their training load and type of sport. Endurance athletes benefit from protein to prevent muscle breakdown during prolonged activity, while strength athletes require protein to support muscle hypertrophy and repair. Timing protein intake post-exercise is particularly crucial for maximizing muscle protein synthesis.

3. *Fats:* Fats are a key source of energy, especially during prolonged, low-to-moderate-intensity exercise. Healthy fat intake supports hormonal balance and the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. Athletes should aim for 20-35% of their daily caloric intake from healthy fats, with an emphasis on sources such as avocados, nuts, seeds, and fatty fish. Balancing fat intake is essential to prevent gastrointestinal distress during training or competition.

Hydration

Proper hydration is vital for maintaining performance and preventing dehydration, which can lead to fatigue, reduced cognitive function, and heat-related illnesses. Athletes should monitor fluid intake before, during, and after training or competition. Electrolyte replacement is crucial for prolonged activities to restore sodium, potassium, and other minerals lost through sweat. Individual hydration needs vary based on factors such as climate, intensity, and sweat rate, necessitating personalized hydration strategies.

Micronutrients and Supplements

1. *Micronutrients:* Vitamins and minerals, such as calcium, iron, magnesium, and vitamin D, are essential for optimal performance and recovery. Iron, for instance, is crucial for oxygen transport and energy production, particularly in endurance athletes. Female athletes and those following plant-based diets may require additional attention to micronutrient intake.

2. *Supplements*: While whole foods should be the primary source of nutrients, certain supplements can be beneficial for athletes when used appropriately. Examples include:

❖ Creatine for improved strength and power output.

❖ Caffeine for enhanced endurance and focus.

❖ Beta-alanine for buffering muscle acidosis during high-intensity efforts.

❖ Athletes should consult with a nutritionist or healthcare provider before incorporating supplements into their regimen to ensure safety and efficacy.

Nutrient Timing

The timing of nutrient intake plays a critical role in optimizing performance and recovery.

❖ Pre-exercise: A meal rich in carbohydrates and moderate in protein, consumed 2-3 hours before activity, provides energy and prevents hunger.

❖ During exercise: For prolonged activities, consuming easily digestible carbohydrates (e.g., sports drinks or gels) helps maintain energy levels.

❖ Post-exercise: Consuming carbohydrates and protein within 30-60 minutes after exercise accelerates glycogen replenishment and muscle repair.

Individualisation and Sport-Specific Needs

Athletes' nutritional requirements vary based on their sport, training schedule, and personal goals. Endurance athletes prioritize carbohydrates for sustained energy, while strength athletes focus on protein to support muscle growth. Additionally, young athletes, female athletes, and those with specific dietary preferences (e.g., vegetarian or vegan diets) require tailored nutritional strategies to meet their unique needs.

Conclusion

Nutrition represents a fundamental component of athletic performance, recovery, and long-term health. Evidence indicates that individualized nutritional strategies integrating balanced macronutrient intake, adequate hydration, optimal micronutrient status, and appropriate nutrient timing enhance physiological adaptation, support recovery, and improve competitive performance. Because nutritional requirements differ according to sport-specific demands, training load, and individual characteristics, dietary interventions should be tailored to each athlete's physiological profile and performance objectives. Future research should investigate personalized, evidence-based nutritional approaches and evaluate their long-term effects on performance, injury prevention, and overall health. Strengthening nutrition education and ensuring access to qualified sports nutrition professionals are essential for translating scientific evidence into practice, thereby maximizing athletic potential and supporting sustainable athlete development throughout the competitive lifespan.

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