

Military OneSource Podcast — A Warfighter's Guide to Performance Nutrition

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

What you eat before a mission, during intense training and after recovery can be the difference between peak performance and burnout. But with so many options, how can service members choose what's right for their bodies and their readiness? Hi. I am Bruce Moody. Today, we're diving into what performance nutrition really means and how small changes can lead to big results. Share this episode with other service members who may benefit from this type of tailored insight. You can find us on any podcast platform, just search for Military OneSource, and subscribe while you're at it. As always, we love to hear your feedback. There's a link in the show notes where you can share your thoughts. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department offering support and resources for every step of military life. Now, here's today's conversation. Army Capt. Tina Sergi, welcome to the podcast.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Thank you, Bruce, for having me.

Bruce Moody:

You are the assistant chief for Nutrition, Education and Research, which is at Walter Reed National Medical Center, which if you don't know, it's just outside of Washington, D.C. Tell us a little bit about you and your role at that position.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah. So, my name is Capt. Tina Sergi. I'm currently serving as the assistant chief of the Nutrition, Education and Research Department at Walter Reed. Prior to joining the military, I completed my bachelor's in nutrition at the University of New Hampshire and then went and did my master's and my Dietetic Internship at Oklahoma State. At the time, I really never thought about joining the military, didn't really know about the opportunities that the military had for registered dietitians.

But while I was at Oklahoma State, I was exposed to working with some tactical populations and was lucky enough to spend two months of my internship working with special operators and just absolutely loved it. And so, now I get to work at Walter Reed, and specifically in my position, I get to run some of our research studies, primarily focusing on body composition, the Army Combat Fitness Test or now the Army Fitness

Test, and also on the menstrual cycle. And so, in addition to that, I get to do some one-on-one nutrition counseling as well as teach some group nutrition classes.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. And you went to Oklahoma State? I went to University of Oklahoma, which I think officially makes us rivals, but I would put all of that aside for this conversation.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yes, I think it does.

Bruce Moody:

So, we're going to have a conversation around a phrase that I think is really cool and maybe you can define it for us, and that's performance nutrition.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah. So, I would define performance nutrition really as the branch of nutrition that hones in on improving an individual's nutrition habits. And this can range from your basic nutrition habits to nutrient timing throughout the day, all the way to supplement intake. And so, all of this combined, we really want to use to optimize physical and occupational performance as well as recovery from training.

Bruce Moody:

And when you're looking at that description of performance nutrition, how do you apply it to the mission? How do you apply it to war fighters who are focused on lethality?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah. Performance nutrition is super critical for our service members. At the end of the day, we need our military personnel to be able to perform at their best whenever they're needed, and potentially in austere environments. And some of our military personnel work in really physically demanding jobs, so it's my job as a dietician to ensure that they're properly fueled and able to sustain that high level of occupational performance each day.

Bruce Moody:

We've done a bunch of podcast episodes that focus on nutrition and some of the options for food that are available to service members, and maybe you can talk about them. And folks who use them already know about them, but maybe people don't know that we have nutrition kiosks and fueling stations. What are these? What do they look like, and how do they help service members make healthy choices in real time, work that into their training or their fitness schedule?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, absolutely. At Walter Reed currently, we don't have any nutrition kiosks or fueling stations since we're mainly at a hospital campus here. However, those initiatives can be huge game changers for promoting convenient but also nutritious food options throughout the day, and also before and after training for both athletes, service members. And so, as an example, when I was a student at the University of New Hampshire, I was able to volunteer at our athlete fueling station, which is similar to what's going to be available on Army installations. And we had a variety of food options ranging from fruits and applesauce into protein bars and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And since it was by the door to our training field, it was really well utilized by our student athletes.

Bruce Moody:

So, I'm a retired navy chief, and I can tell you that it wasn't always like this. These options just have not always been around, so it has been changing over time. What would you say are some of the most encouraging trends of what you've seen with regard to military nutrition?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

I would say two trends really come to mind here. First education, and second, access to nutrition care. So, for education, the department level here at Walter Reed, we teach a variety of classes. Specifically, I teach a class with our physical therapy clinic, and I know one of our other dietitians here teaches a class for Behavioral Health. So, lots of opportunities to really collaborate with other departments and provide nutrition education in group settings. At the brigade level, we've also had opportunities to do nutrition briefs. Our most recent one was on fueling for rucking, and we did that with our personnel who competed for the EFMB earlier this year.

And of course, on the Army holistic health and fitness side, we're seeing more and more dietitians being placed at the brigade level to promote nutritional readiness across the force. For access to nutrition care, specifically again at Walter Reed, you can always give our clinic a call for nutrition services without a referral. And what I've seen from H-F units, some of them will have a website where you can just go online and book an appointment yourself. So overall, I think nutrition's become a lot more visible and more available to our service members.

Bruce Moody:

Alright. And I heard along the way, an acronym that I honestly don't know, it's EFMB?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Oh, sorry. Expert Field Medical Badge.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, okay. So that's obviously something you're out there on the field, you're burning a lot of calories, and so what you eat makes a big difference in how you're able to do your job. How can small dietary choices, positive or negative, affect physical training, job performance, and also long-term health?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, so something I've noticed from some of my younger, really motivated service members that I've worked with is that they often want to go from zero to a hundred in their nutrition goals. So for example, if they're currently eating just one meal a day, not getting in any fruits and vegetables, a lot of times they'll look at me and tell me that their goal is to have three meals per day every single day, and each meal's going to have one fruit and a serving a vegetable. And while all of that's really great and an awesome goal to really strive for long-term, we really need to hone in and think about what are they currently doing, where are they currently at, and what's going to be most sustainable for them in the long run? And for that, it's going to be making those small daily changes to nutrition habits that we make over time.

Bruce Moody:

Have there been any standout moments or success stories that you can share where your work with service members really made a difference in their health, maybe also recovery, but also mission readiness?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

I worked with a soldier a couple of years ago. She came in and was feeling just really fatigued throughout the day and during her workouts. And generally speaking, I would say she ate really nutritiously each day, but based on her estimated calorie needs and just her protein needs for her lifestyle and her training, she just wasn't eating enough throughout the day. And using the foods that she was already eating, so we did a quick diet recall just to figure out what are the typical foods that she ate. We were able to adjust her portion sizes, add in some more complex carbohydrates and some protein. And then when she came back just about a month later, she was feeling significantly less fatigued during the day, her training was going a lot better. And overall, the combination of the two translates to increased readiness.

Bruce Moody:

I would like you to share some practical tips or maybe resources that you recommend for people to eat at peak performance. I'm really glad to be asking this question to you because you understand the military life, what it's like when you're busy, when you have an unpredictable schedule, or when the day involves you burning a lot of calories.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

The number one tip I would have is just to really plan ahead as best as you can. So, for example, if you can meal prep, say, on Sunday over the weekend, meal prep a carb, a lean protein in some color, so fruits and vegetables, then I think that would be one really great step to take. Other things, if you can keep healthy snacks in your bag, so something shelf stable between protein bars, protein shakes, et cetera, that would be a good option as well. And then also just keeping nutritious foods in plain sight. So, all together, these combined can really help ensure that you're fueled throughout the day and can help take out the stress of planning and preparing meals and snacks every single day.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Let's stay on this for a little bit. Maybe a rapid fire Q&A. Do nutrition needs need to change based on training type such as strength, endurance or combat?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

There's going to be general recommendations for both strength training and endurance training. So specifically in terms of carbs, protein, however, there can definitely be a good amount of overlap given that service members are often involved in both endurance and strength training for overall combat readiness. For more specific recommendations on calorie needs, protein needs and more, I would always recommend working one-on-one with a dietitian on your installation.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. What are good post-training meals or snacks for workout recovery, is there a key nutrient that boosts stamina?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, so after training, definitely aiming to get in some carbs and protein as soon as possible after a workout, it's going to be most beneficial. And so, some quick snack ideas for post-workout, chocolate milk's a great option. Yogurt parfaits with fruit and granola, and even protein shakes or smoothies are good. And then for meal ideas, a breakfast example could be maybe a veggie scramble with toast, for lunch or dinner, stir-fry with chicken, frozen mixed vegetables and rice is another good option as well.

Bruce Moody:

What's the best fuel source for long work days?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, believe it or not, the answer in this case is not going to be more caffeine or more energy drinks.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, darn.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

I know Monsters have definitely been popular around here lately, but to fuel for our more long work days, definitely eating balanced meals and snacks every three to four hours is going to be most beneficial to keep your energy up throughout the day.

Bruce Moody:

So, staying on that, what is your take on caffeine and creatine, and other supplements?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, so both caffeine and creatine definitely have a good amount of evidence supporting their benefits for performance, but it's definitely important to know that not all supplements are created equal. So, when looking into taking these supplements, the first thing I would always look for on a label is a third-party certification. So, that just means that the supplement has been tested for purity, and that what's listed on the label is going to be what's in the container.

Bruce Moody:

How can somebody tell if a supplement is safe and effective?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

In terms of supplement safety, I would highly recommend checking out the Operation Supplement Safety website or OPSS. And so, on their website you can look up ingredients and see if they're on the DOD prohibited list or not. And you can also use their supplement scorecard to make informed choices on whatever supplements you might be interested in. And then for effectiveness, the Australian Institute of Sport has created a sports supplement framework where they categorize supplements as A, B, C or D, just based on evidence supporting their use. For example, caffeine and creatine are both part of the group A, meaning that there's strong evidence for use in sport.

Bruce Moody:

Interesting. Alright. Let's talk about hydration. What are some of the best hydration strategies for peak performance?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

One general recommendation for hydrating throughout the day is to drink at least half of your body weight and ounces each day. But of course, with increased training and increased sweating, a one-to-one ratio may be more appropriate for certain individuals. Hydration's also going to be super important during our lengthy endurance events such as running or rucking. So, ensuring that you're hydrating not only with water, but also

with electrolytes or a sports beverage throughout the duration of the event will be helpful to decrease risk of dehydration and potentially becoming a heat cat.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, heat casualty.

Bruce Moody:

I thought so. I didn't want to assume. Okay. Last question here. What would be your go-to strategy for healthy eating at the dining facility?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah, a couple things definitely come to mind here. First, we have go for green at some of our DFACS, so this is where foods with green labeling are going to be our least processed foods. Yellow is going to have some processing, and red is considered most processed. So, this definitely doesn't mean to eat only green all the time, but it can be used more as a guide to make more informed nutritious choices throughout the day. The second thing that comes to mind is the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs developed what's called the Athlete's Plate, and this can just be found online on their website. And in a nutshell, it's a graphic of three plates based on an easy, moderate or a hard training day. And these graphics can be helpful when it comes to building and portioning a plate. So, for example, if I had a strenuous day of training, I can aim to fill half of my plate with whole grain to help refuel and recover. A quarter of my plate with lean protein and the last quarter with the vegetables.

Bruce Moody:

We're going to put some links in the program notes where people can read more, but for people who want to meet with somebody and talk, take those first steps, what would you recommend that they do?

Capt. Tina Sergi:

For those who are in the national capitol region, specifically near Walter Reed, you can always look on the Walter Reed website, and look for outpatient clinical nutrition services on there. Our phone number's on there, so you're always more than welcome to give us a call, and schedule an appointment with one of our dietitians. And then for those who are outside of the national capitol region, I would always recommend just going to your installations website and checking to see what nutrition services are available. A lot of times you'll have a clinic phone number on there, and you can always reach out to them to see what's available appointment-wise.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Well, Captain Sergi, we really appreciate you being on the podcast with us.

Capt. Tina Sergi:

Yeah. Thank you for the opportunity to come on and chat with you all.

Bruce Moody:

Our pleasure. Come back anytime. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes where you can send us a comment or a question and maybe an idea for a future episode. And please subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.