

FOOD AND NUTRITION IN PALLIATIVE CARE

Olympic gold diet

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In the 5th century BC, during the Golden Age of Greece, the Olympic games in ancient Olympia were at their highest point. Moving forward 2,500 years, Greece is sadly in dire straits and here in London we prepare to welcome the next modern Olympic games in 2012.

Much has changed since ancient Olympia, but one feature remains the same: the athletes' preparation for the event. To boost their performance, athletes often prepare by following a rigorous exercise regime with a strict dietetic schedule. These diets are quite different from everyday diets and are often kept secret. Athletes and their nutritionists are only too aware of the critical effect of diet on their body: influencing not only the athlete's weight, but also their height (in teenage athletes), strength and endurance, hormonal status, concentration and sleep. Perhaps, we could learn a thing or two from them. As

Hippocrates wrote in his book 'On ancient medicine', '...those who study gymnastics and athletic exercises are constantly making some fresh discovery, using methods similar to physicians, investigating what foods and drinks are best assimilated and make a man grow stronger'.

The daily regime of athletes in ancient Greece included physical training, education in religion, philosophy and logic, music and dance and last, but not least, a diet rich in natural healthy foods and healing herbs. The diet was high in calories, proteins, vitamins and minerals. It included honey and nuts, wholemeal barley bread, pulses, greens, fruit and some dairy, fish or meat. Of these foods, dried figs were especially important, not just for the nutrition of athletes and labourers but also for everyone's health. It was therefore forbidden to export figs, called 'syco' in Greek, and people were encouraged to expose those who secretly

exported figs for profit. Some used this as an opportunity to falsely accuse others of this crime or to take personal revenge.

Figs are arguably the oldest fruit in human history while fig trees have profoundly influenced culture and feature as important symbols in many of the world's religious traditions. Nutritionally, figs are a good source of energy (249 kcal/100 grammes). They can help to lower insulin resistance, are rich in vitamins A and C, as well as potassium, calcium, magnesium and phosphorus (all essential minerals for cellular functions), rich in fibre (which improves bowel performance) and full of phenols and antioxidants (known for their cytotoxic, immune boosting and anti-inflammatory functions). They have been used for millennia both as food and as traditional medicine to treat various illnesses such as tumours, rheumatism and dysentery and to alleviate symptoms, such as

constipation, cough and pain.

Figs could be ideal for our patients as a natural rich source of calories and micronutrients, as well as for their beneficial effect on insulin resistance and inflammation – cardinal features of the anorexia-cachexia syndrome. In palliative care, because of the situation of our patients and the many difficulties with conducting large research trials, we often have to extrapolate results from trials that have been done in groups of patients who are different from ours. The plethora of nutritional data created by thousands of scientists across the world, as well as athletes and their trainers, could be used for the practical benefit of our patients.

Perhaps we too could learn from the determination and dedication of Olympic athletes to improve the various functions of our bodies to gain that ultimate prize: an Olympic medal. The Olympic gold diet can help transform weakness into strength. ■

Poached winter fruit compote



Method

1. Combine a selection of dried figs, prunes and apricots with raisins, fresh dates and apples.
2. Put the fruit in a pot with water, a cinnamon stick, a few cardamom pods, three or four cloves and a pinch of saffron. Add honey to taste.
3. Boil until fruit is soft.
4. Serve hot or cold.

Links

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