

Tips for Coaches: Preventing Eating Disorders in Athletes

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- 1. Take warning signs and eating disordered behaviors seriously! Cardiac arrest and suicide are the leading causes of death for people with eating disorders.**
2. If an athlete is chronically dieting or exhibits mildly abnormal eating, refer to a health professional with eating disorder expertise. *Early detection increases the likelihood of successful treatment; left untreated the problem may progress to an eating disorder.*
3. De-emphasize weight by *not* weighing athletes and eliminate comments about weight. Instead, focus on areas in which athletes have more control in order to improve performance. For example, focus on strength and physical conditioning, as well as the mental and emotional components of performance. There is no risk in improving mental and emotional capacities.
4. Don't assume that reducing body fat or weight will enhance performance. While weight loss or a reduction in body fat can lead to improved performance, studies show this does not apply to all athletes. It is not uncommon for individuals attempting to lose weight to develop eating disorder symptoms. *Performance should not be at the expense of the athlete's health.*
5. Instruct coaches and trainers to recognize signs and symptoms of eating disorders and understand their role in prevention. Those with eating problems often hide their symptoms to avoid calling attention to them. They are often ashamed and aware that the behavior is abnormal.
6. Provide athletes with *accurate* information regarding weight, weight loss, body composition, nutrition, and sports performance to reduce misinformation and to challenge unhealthy practices. Be aware of local professionals who will help educate the athletes.
7. Emphasize the health risks of low weight, especially for female athletes with menstrual irregularities or amenorrhea. The athlete should be referred for medical assessments in these cases.
8. Understand why weight is such a sensitive and personal issue for many women. Eliminate derogatory comments or behaviors about weight—no matter how slight. If there is concern about an athlete's weight, the athlete should be referred for an assessment to a professional skilled in diagnosing and treating eating disorders.
9. Do not automatically curtail athletic participation if an athlete is found to have eating problems, unless warranted by a medical condition. Consider the athlete's health, physical and emotional safety, and self-image when making decisions regarding an athlete's level of participation in his/her sport.
10. Coaches and trainers should explore their own values and attitudes regarding weight, dieting, and body image, and how their values and attitudes may inadvertently affect their athletes. They should understand their role in promoting a positive self-image and self-esteem in their athletes.

