

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 her or him 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 other areas in which athletes can improve performance. For example, focus on strength and physical conditioning, as well as the mental and emotional components of performance.
4. **Don't assume that reducing body fat or weight will enhance performance.** While it may 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, which can physically weaken the athlete. 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, (weight loss, fatigue, over-training, refusal to eat with the team, frequent injuries, etc.) and understand their role in prevention.** Eating-disordered individuals often hide their symptoms out of shame and embarrassment.
6. **Provide athletes with accurate information regarding weight, weight loss, body composition, nutrition, and sports performance to reduce misinformation and to challenge unhealthy practices.** Consult NEDA's Coach and Trainer Toolkit, <http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/information-resources/coach-trainer-toolkit.php>. NEDA also has listings of local professionals who can help educate the athletes.

7. **Emphasize the health risks of low weight, especially for female athletes with menstrual irregularities or amenorrhea. Risks include low bone density, lowering of immunity and autoimmune illnesses.** 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. Celebrate the athlete for talents and strengths beyond the physical; work on developing body, mind and spirit. 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. **It is essential for coaches and trainers to 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. Remember, if athletes do not take care of their bodies, they risk losing their athletic careers at a very young age.