

Athletic programs: playing it safe

RISK CONTROL eGUIDE

Athletic sports embody everything about the competitive spirit while teaching players about team dynamics and the rules of fair play. But there is some degree of risk in playing the game – especially if the limits of strength, endurance and speed are pushed. “Athletes who push the limits sometimes don’t recognize their own *limitations...*,” says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This can lead to injuries and illness, including sprains and strains, heat illness, concussions and heart failure.

Educational institutions, both public and private, and parks and recreation departments that sponsor competitive sports programs should have a safety and health program that promotes sound practices to help athletes play it safe and stay healthy. Programs may vary depending on the age of participants and the level of competition. In all cases, they should be reviewed routinely to help ensure they are current and comply with applicable state laws and athletic association bylaws as appropriate. They also should review the best practices promoted by athletic associations, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the National Federation of State High School Association, state high school and middle school athletic associations and coaches associations, among others.

Coaches, athletes, school officials and parents all play an important role in helping to ensure safe practices in competitive sports. When a player is not playing it safe or a health issue or injury is suspected, the player should be taken out of play. In instances of an injury or suspected injury or health issue, the player’s condition should be evaluated (including, as appropriate, an evaluation by a medical professional) and the player not returned to the game or sport program until medically released for play. Coaches and athletes should be trained in the signs and symptoms of health-related issues during conditioning, practice and play, including for heat illness, concussions and heart failure, among others, and take timely and appropriate responsive action to help mitigate the health impact.

Competitive sports – playing it safe programs and practices

Athletic programs should include sound risk control principles to help in injury prevention. Some program principles include, but are not limited to:

General risk management principles

- Hire qualified, certified coaches and athletic trainers
- Establish and communicate a policy and procedure for reporting and addressing incidents of youth abuse and molestation. Educate all coaches, athletic trainers, athletes, other school officials and parents on your policy and procedure
- Ensure all paperwork is signed and received before the start of the season, including: Annual consent and acknowledgment of risk of injury forms and waivers signed by athletes and/or parent
Good sportsmanship/conduct forms signed by athletes
Annual proof of individual, parental or institutional health insurance (covering sport injuries)
An annual medical exam/evaluation and immunization record from a qualified medical professional, giving clearance to play a particular sport
- Promote a drug-free environment
- Provide planned and supervised conditioning, practice, competition and travel
- Comply with applicable state laws and, for NCAA member institutions, all NCAA bylaws

Health, wellness and medical management

- Have medical resources/qualified medical professionals in place in the event of an emergency, including the capability of early defibrillation per your state law
- Educate coaches and athletes on heat illness, sickle cell trait, heart disorders, staph infections (MRSA), sprain/strain and head injuries Put measures in place to mitigate the effects of extreme heat (rest breaks, fluids), and be prepared to respond to signs of heat illness Provide conditioning and practice exercises within the capabilities of athletes for optimal readiness. Be aware of any medical restrictions for athletes regarding exercising and extreme heat Teach athletes about the importance of good hygiene, especially regarding skin breaks, abrasions and skin infections, which could lead to staph infections/MRSA
- Have a written catastrophic injury response plan
- Have a written concussion management plan Consider the use of baseline testing for concussion management. Baseline testing provides a pre-injury capabilities score for memory, reaction times and cognitive processing and can help medical professionals make return-to-play decisions, post injury
- Review OSHA's blood-borne pathogens standard to determine its applicability to your program
- Require a post-injury release form from a qualified medical professional before an injured athlete returns to play

Additional information for concussion mitigation and management

Concussions can be silent villains – the signs may not be readily detected. They can lead to brain damage, paralysis and, in some cases, death. To help coaches, athletes and parents identify and respond to concussions, a number of organizations offer information on concussion prevention and management, including the NCAA and the American Football Coaches Association. Additionally, the CDC, in partnership with leading organizations and experts, also provides ***Heads Up: Concussion in High School Sports***. In addition to knowing the symptoms and what to do in the event of a concussion, “Heads Up” recommends a four-step *Heads Up Action Plan* before the season starts, as well as educating athletes and parents.

Facility and equipment

- Use safety standards when purchasing mandated personal protective equipment. Maintain and repair equipment at all times. Have a process for athletes to inform coaching staff when equipment becomes unsafe or illegal
- Provide mandated protective equipment. Train athletes on and enforce use and proper fit
- Routinely inspect your athletic area/facility, including the warm up area, and playing fields for maintenance, repair and good housekeeping
- Be prepared for lightning. Education and prevention are key to avoiding risks associated with lightning strikes

An athletic program based on sound safety and health management principles can help schools and park and recreation departments play it safe!



eResources

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Competitive sports associations

National Collegiate Athletic Association

National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association – Student Health

National Federation of State High School Association State Listings

Association for Middle School Education, Sports web page

Health, wellness and medical management

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

Preseason Baseline Testing

MRSA for Coaches and Athletic Directors

MRSA for School Officials

Resources for coaches, athletes, parents and school officials for concussion prevention and response. Some resources in Spanish.

Heads Up: Concussion in High School Sports

Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports

National collegiate athletic association (NCAA)

NCAA Health and Safety Web Portal

Sports Injuries

Heat Illness

Cardiac Health

Concussions

Sickle Cell Trait

NCAA Sports Medicine Handbook

Other resources

Sports Concussions

State Laws

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