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Q: Are athletes immune or more susceptible to developing eating disorders?

Answer: Athletes are not immune from developing disordered eating behavior. In fact, a number of studies suggest athletes may be more susceptible to the development of an eating disorder when compared to the non-athlete population. Eating disorder behavior can range from mild disordered eating to a full blown diagnosis of an eating disorder (anorexia and/or bulimia). Institutions should view eating disorders as a serious health concern. An eating disorder can jeopardize the physical and psychological well-being of a student-athlete, affecting not only the athlete's performance, but the culture and health of his/her team. It is necessary to first identify those athletes at risk for an eating disorder and then provide them with appropriate medical, psychological, and nutritional care to aid in their recovery. It is also critical to decide if an athlete is safe to continue competing in their sport, or must have restrictions put on their level of activity. In order to facilitate cooperation between student-athletes, athletic trainers, coaches, and health- care providers, policies and procedures should be adopted that apply when faced with an athlete with suspected eating disorder.

Key elements of such a policy and procedure should include:

- Prohibiting the weighing of student-athletes in non-weight controlled sports, with the exception of weigh-ins related to high heat conditions and the loss of fluids.
- Inclusion of a section in the required pre-participation medical screening questionnaire specifically addresses nutrition and eating disorder screening questions.
- Requiring a training session is conducted at the beginning of the school year for coaches and athletic trainers on identification, referral, and treatment of athletes with eating disorders.
- Provision for an eating disorder treatment team has been designated with the head athletic trainer serving as athletic department liaison to the team.
- Comprehensive provisions related to the identification and treatment of eating disorders, including the right to restrict participation of medically unstable athletes.
- Designation of an administrator who interfaces with medical/psychological service providers in more serious cases regarding athletes with eating disorders, and who is responsible for enforcing eating disorder policy guidelines.

Topics

Medical / Training

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