

The Athlete's Heart

What do Hank Gathers, Daniel Rumph and Reggie Lewis have in common? Not only were they great basketball players but they all died suddenly from a heart condition called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy or "HCM" for short. What is HCM? There are various types but all involve thickening of the heart muscle which blocks or reduces the flow of oxygen rich blood from the heart. HCM has a genetic component and most people develop HCM during their teenage years or early adulthood. About 1 in 500 people has HCM. Another interesting fact is that it's the most common heart related killer of men younger than 30.

The next question you may ask is: what can be done in terms of prevention? Unfortunately, the first noticeable symptom is death. However, there are some milder signs and symptoms such as chest pain, racing heart, dizziness or blackout, shortness of breath or an unexplained death in the family. In Italy, every athlete wanting to participate in competitive athletics must undergo a comprehensive physical that includes an electrocardiogram (ECG) which detects any electrical abnormalities in the heart and an echocardiogram which is an ultrasound of the heart. If an Italian athlete is diagnosed with HCM, they are prohibited from competitive sport. Italian researchers have stated that they have been able to reduce sudden cardiovascular deaths in athletes between the ages of 12-35 by almost 90%. In North America, medical experts believe that sort of testing is too expensive and it would be impossible to screen every single athlete in the general population. Diagnosing athletes with HCM is complicated by the fact that hearts can grow naturally as a result of competitive athletics and exercise.

The obvious treatment option for HCM is the elimination of vigorous exercise. For those who wish to remain active some patients have opted for an implanted defibrillator in their chest that detects any heart spasms caused from HCM and then delivers an electrical impulse to the heart muscle. Drugs can improve blood flow within the heart but they are only effective in two-thirds of patients. Surgery is another option and in some studies has a 70 percent success rate.

Overall, the best way of preventing complications from HCM is staying informed. If you think you or your child may have some of the signs or symptoms listed earlier, talk to your medical professional about testing or a referral to a cardiologist knowledgeable about HCM. To read more about this disease visit the Canadian Heart and Stroke Association's website at: <http://ww2.heartandstroke.ca> or the Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Association website at: <http://www.4hcm.org>.

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