

THE FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD

Currently, health professionals and coaches have used the term "Female Athlete Triad" (triad means three) to refer to athletic girls who have the following:

Abnormal eating: Abnormal eating means that your body is not getting the correct amount of nutrients. You may be focusing too much of your time on eating, diets, and staying thin. Healthy nutrition is needed to have regular periods and normal estrogen levels. There are two common eating disorders related to the Female Athlete Triad. They are:

Anorexia nervosa: This eating disorder happens when not enough calories and nutrition are taken in to maintain a healthy weight.

Bulimia: The practice of binge eating (eating too much uncontrollably in one sitting) and then purging (vomiting, exercising intensely) to get rid of the food just eaten. Poor eating habits can cause heart problems such as an irregular heart beat, muscle weakness or fatigue, fainting, and loss of concentration with school work and athletics.

Amenorrhea: This is the absence of menstrual periods for longer than 6 months. This lack of menstrual periods can happen when there is weight loss, disordered eating, or intense training or exercise. The body needs a certain level of fats in the body, especially omega 3 fats, to manufacture hormones like estrogen and cell membranes. Girls will stop their periods if their fat intake drops to an unhealthy level. Normal levels of estrogen are important for the body to absorb calcium (a mineral your body needs to build strong bones). Not enough estrogen can cause bones to lose thickness and strength. Having a period only every 2 to 3 months or very light periods is a sign that the athlete may be pushing her body too hard.

Osteoporosis: This is when bones are weaker than they should be.

Although physical activity helps to build a healthy skeleton and strong bones, too much exercise can cause problems if the athlete is not having regular periods and normal estrogen levels. Everyone, teenage girls especially, need the right balance of exercise, body weight, calcium intake in your diet, vitamin D, and estrogen levels to have healthy bones. It is very important for teenage girls to build bone mass. After the age of 20, women add very little bone mass to their bodies. Stress fractures are another concern. A stress fracture is a small crack in bones when athletes perform a repetitive activity such as those found in jogging or gymnastics. If they continue to practice on a stress fracture, it may evolve into a true bone fracture.

Females in any sport can develop one or more parts of the triad. At greatest risk are those in sports that reward being thin for appearance (i.e., figure skating, gymnastics) or improved performance (i.e., distance running, rowing).

Treatment for the Female Athlete Triad

Give your body enough energy to fuel performance. During sports seasons, make sure you eat a healthy diet with enough calories to make up for all of your training. Try not to lose weight if you are already a normal weight. Check with your health care provider and discuss healthy weights for you. Through eating a healthy diet high in omega 3 fats like fish and nuts and taking vitamins, make sure you get 1500 mg of calcium and 800 international units of vitamin D every day to keep your bones strong. A daily multi-vitamin in capsular form is another good idea.

Keep a menstrual calendar. If you are skipping menstrual periods, see your health care provider. It may be a sign that your body is under too much physical, emotional, nutritional or mental stress.

Respect your pain. If you develop the same pain in your leg or foot every time you run, the same pain in your back whenever you do gymnastics, or the same pain in any part of your body whenever you do the same activity, you may have a stress fracture. Be sure to get it checked out by a health professional.

Use a multidisciplinary approach. If you are bingeing, purging, not letting yourself eat, or worried about your weight a lot of the time, get help from coaches, trainers, and health care providers. While some problems, such as anorexia and bulimia, may be hard to talk about with someone, the earlier they are treated, the better. Your doctor may also recommend a bone density test called Dual Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry scan or DEXA for short. This is a pain-free test that uses low radiation waves to take an image of your bones. A bone scan may also be ordered if a stress fracture is suspected.