SUDDEN CARDIAC DEATH IN YOUNG ATHLETES

The Basic Facts on Sudden Cardiac Death in Young Athletes

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SUDDEN DEATH is the result of an unexpected failure of proper heart function, usually (about 60% of the time) during or immediately after exercise without trauma. Since the heart stops pumping adequately, the athlete quickly collapses, loses consciousness, and ultimately dies unless normal heart rhythm is restored using an automated external defibrillator (AED).

What is sudden cardiac death in the young athlete?

Sudden cardiac death is very rare. About 100 such deaths are reported in the United States per year. The chance of sudden death occurring to any individual high school athlete is about one in 200,000 per year.

How common is sudden death in young athletes?

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What are the most common causes?

The most common cause of sudden death in an athlete is hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (hi-per-TRO-fic car-dee-oh-my-OP-a-thee) also called HCM. HCM is a disease of the heart, with abnormal thickening of the heart muscle, which can cause serious heart rhythm problems and blockages to blood flow. This genetic disease runs in families and usually develops gradually over many years.

The second most likely cause is congenital (con-JEN-it-al) (i.e., present from birth) abnormalities of the coronary arteries. This means that these blood vessels are connected to the main blood vessel of the heart in an abnormal way. This differs from blockages that may occur when people get older (commonly called “coronary artery disease,” which may lead to a heart attack).

Website Resources
- Sudden Death in Athletes http://tinyurl.com/m2gjmwq
- Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Association www.4hcm.org
- American Heart Association www.heart.org

Collaborating Agencies:
- American Academy of Pediatrics
  - New Jersey Chapter
    3836 Quakerbridge Road, Suite 108
    Hamilton, NJ 08619
    (p) 609-842-0014
    (f) 609-842-0015
    www.aapnj.org
- American Heart Association
  1 Union Street, Suite 301
  Robbinsville, NJ, 08691
  (p) 609-208-0020
  www.heart.org
- New Jersey Department of Education
  PO Box 500
  Trenton, NJ 08625-0500
  (p) 609-292-5935
  www.state.nj.us/education/
- New Jersey Department of Health
  P.O. Box 360
  Trenton, NJ 08625-0360
  (p) 609-292-7837
  www.state.nj.us/health

Lead Author: American Academy of Pediatrics, New Jersey Chapter
Written by: Initial draft by Sushma Raman Hebbar, MD & Stephen G. Rice, MD PhD
Additional Reviewers: NJ Department of Education, NJ Department of Health and Senior Services, American Heart Association/New Jersey Chapter, NJ Academy of Family Practice, Pediatric Cardiologists, New Jersey State School Nurses
Revised 2014: Nancy Curry, EdM;
Christene DeWitt-Parker, MSN, CSN, RN;
Lakota Kruse, MD, MPH; Susan Martz, EdM;
Stephen G. Rice, MD; Jeffrey Rosenberg, MD,
Louis Teichholz, MD; Perry Weinstock, MD

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American Heart Association
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Other diseases of the heart that can lead to sudden death in young people include:

- Myocarditis (my-oh-car-DIE-tis), an acute inflammation of the heart muscle (usually due to a virus).
- Dilated cardiomyopathy, an enlargement of the heart for unknown reasons.
- Long QT syndrome and other electrical abnormalities of the heart which cause abnormal fast heart rhythms that can also run in families.
- Marfan syndrome, an inherited disorder that affects heart valves, walls of major arteries, eyes and the skeleton. It is generally seen in unusually tall athletes, especially if being tall is not common in other family members.

### What are the current recommendations for screening young athletes?

New Jersey requires all school athletes to be examined by their primary care physician (“medical home”) or school physician at least once per year. The New Jersey Department of Education requires use of the specific Preparticipation Physical Examination Form (PPE).

This process begins with the parents and student athletes answering questions about symptoms during exercise (such as chest pain, dizziness, fainting, palpitations or shortness of breath); and questions about family health history.

The primary healthcare provider needs to know if any family member died suddenly during physical activity or during a seizure. They also need to know if anyone in the family under the age of 50 had an unexplained sudden death such as drowning or car accidents. This information must be provided annually for each exam because it is so essential to identify those at risk for sudden cardiac death.

The required physical exam includes measurement of blood pressure and a careful examination of the heart, especially for murmurs and rhythm abnormalities. If there are no warning signs reported on the health history and no abnormalities discovered on exam, no further evaluation or testing is recommended.

### Are there options privately available to screen for cardiac conditions?

Technology-based screening programs including a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) and echocardiogram (ECHO) are noninvasive and painless options parents may consider in addition to the required PPE. However, these procedures may be expensive and are not currently advised by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Cardiology unless the PPE reveals an indication for these tests. In addition to the expense, other limitations of technology-based tests include the possibility of “false positives” which leads to unnecessary stress for the student and parent or guardian as well as unnecessary restriction from athletic participation.

### When should a student athlete see a heart specialist?

If the primary healthcare provider or school physician has concerns, a referral to a child heart specialist, a pediatric cardiologist, is recommended. This specialist will perform a more thorough evaluation, including an electrocardiogram (ECG), which is a graph of the electrical activity of the heart. An echocardiogram, which is an ultrasound test to allow for direct visualization of the heart structure, will likely also be done. The specialist may also order a treadmill exercise test and a monitor to enable a longer recording of the heart rhythm. None of the testing is invasive or uncomfortable.

### Can sudden cardiac death be prevented just through proper screening?

A proper evaluation should find most, but not all, conditions that would cause sudden death in the athlete. This is because some diseases are difficult to uncover and may only develop later in life. Others can develop following a normal screening evaluation, such as an infection of the heart muscle from a virus.

This is why screening evaluations and a review of the family health history need to be performed on a yearly basis by the athlete’s primary healthcare provider. With proper screening and evaluation, most cases can be identified and prevented.

### Why have an AED on site during sporting events?

The only effective treatment for ventricular fibrillation is immediate use of an automated external defibrillator (AED). An AED can restore the heart back into a normal rhythm. An AED is also life-saving for ventricular fibrillation caused by a blow to the chest over the heart (commotio cordis). N.J.S.A. 18A:40-41a through c, known as “Janet’s Law,” requires that at any school-sponsored athletic event or team practice in New Jersey public and nonpublic schools, including any of grades K through 12, the following must be available:

- An AED in an unlocked location on school property within a reasonable proximity to the athletic field or gymnasium; and
- A team coach, licensed athletic trainer, or other designated staff member if there is no coach or licensed athletic trainer present, certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the use of the AED; or
- A State-certified emergency services provider or other certified first responder.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the AED should be placed in central location that is accessible and ideally no more than a 1 to 1½ minute walk from any location and that a call is made to activate 911 emergency system while the AED is being retrieved.

### S U D D E N  C A R D I A C  D E A T H  I N  Y O U N G  A T H L E T E S

In more than a third of these sudden cardiac deaths, there were warning signs that were not reported or taken seriously. Warning signs are:

- Fainting, a seizure or convulsions during physical activity;
- Fainting or a seizure from emotional excitement, emotional distress or being startled;
- Dizziness or lightheadedness, especially during exertion;
- Chest pains, at rest or during exertion;
- Palpitations - awareness of the heart beating unusually (skipping, irregular or extra beats) during athletics or during cool down periods after athletic participation;
- Fatigue or tiring more quickly than peers; or
- Being unable to keep up with friends due to shortness of breath (labored breathing).