



Supporting the Health of Special Olympics Athletes

What is this Coach's Corner about?

It takes a team to prepare an athlete for game day, similarly it takes a team to care for our health and well-being. As a coach, you play a critical role in supporting athlete health. Maintaining both mental and physical health before, during, and after the games ensures that athletes are in the best possible condition to perform at their highest level, not just in sports, but in their daily life.

Why do Regular Health Checks Matter?

Taking care of our health is essential for maintaining our overall well-being and enhancing our quality of life. Special Olympics athletes and other folks with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to their health. It is not an even playing field. They tend to have more health issues but a harder time getting the health care they need.

Research shows that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can really benefit from having annual health reviews where they can talk about health issues before they get serious when they are small and where a doctor who knows them well can do a thorough check into everything going on.

However, going to a healthcare visit without preparing is a bit like showing up to a race without ever practicing or warming up. The athlete may not know what to expect. This can make them anxious and they may not remember everything they wanted to say.



Checking in With Your Doctor

A team led by CAMH conducted a [research study](#) on how to help people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their families see their doctor again after the pandemic. They delivered an education program which taught people how to use healthcare tools to make a difference in their check in visits.

It is very important to “get back in the ring”. In this case that means getting back to the doctor to talk about what has been happening and to plan for a healthy future. We call this a check in, and there is a [Health Check-in Tool](#) that people can use to help them be prepared for this type of appointment.

Taking the time to think about what you want to talk about with the doctor is important, and having it written down or having pictures circled to remind you of what you want to say can be a game changer.



4 Tips to Support Health and Well-Being

1. Don't Wait for an Emergency to See a Doctor

Encourage your athletes to see healthcare providers regularly, not just in emergencies, because staying healthy is key to being their best in competition.

2. Encourage Open Conversations About All Aspects of Health

To do our best in sport it is crucial that we have healthy minds and bodies. Some of this work is done on the court, on the field, and in practice, but much of it is actually done before and after games and practices. Encourage athletes to think about the different parts of their life where there can be problems, and share these issues with the doctor or another healthcare provider. Healthcare providers can help with physical injuries and pain but also stress, anxiety, and feeling down.

3. There is No Shame in Getting Help. Treat Doctors and Nurses as a Part of the Team

Did you know that every Olympic athlete has medical staff as part of their team? An important member of all our teams should be the doctor and other key healthcare providers. As coaches, it's important to help athletes and their families understand who is on their healthcare team and what each member does. Athlete health should be a priority in all stages of training. Remember that the healthcare team wants to help them be their best self! A good way to check in on their health is by using the [Health Check-in Tool](#). Above all, remind your athletes that they are at the centre of their healthcare team. 'Nothing about us, without us' means that their voice matters in every conversation.

4. It Helps to be Prepared – Practice Makes Perfect in Sport and in Health Appointments

Preparation is key in both sports and healthcare. A [study](#) (which included Special Olympics Canada athletes and families) found that not everyone was going back to see their doctors after the pandemic and when they did see their doctors, they did not always feel prepared. It can be helpful for athletes to practice what they are hoping to discuss with the healthcare team. Resources such as [About My Health](#) to help athletes' healthcare teams know how to best support them, and the [My Health Care Visit](#) tool to help athletes keep track of the health concerns they want to bring up at a particular appointment.

Additional Resources

[My Strong Mind](#) is a tool developed for Special Olympics athletes to help them know what is normal for them. The IDD [Family Matters Toolkit](#) has many tools to help families support their family member with a disability. To learn more about why Health Check-In's are so important after the pandemic, you can read this [Article](#) or [Easy Read Summary](#).

About the Team

This coach's corner was written by Dr. Yona Lunskey. This project was led by Dr. Avra Selick from CAMH, together with Special Olympics Canada athletes, caregivers, coaches, researchers and community partners from across the country.

About H-CARDD

[Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services.

H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively.

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