



Supporting the Health of Special Olympics Athletes

What is this Snapshot about?

It takes a team to prepare an athlete for game day, similarly, it takes a team to care for our health and wellbeing. As a parent or sibling, you play a critical role in supporting your athlete's health. Maintaining both mental and physical health before, during, and after the games helps athletes be in the best possible condition to perform at their highest level, not just in sports, but in their daily life. While much of this work happens on the court or field, a significant portion is done at home, before and after games and practices.

Why Do Regular Health Checks Matter?

Special Olympics athletes and other folks with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities tend to have more health issues and a harder time getting the health care that they need.

Research shows that people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities can benefit from having annual health reviews where they can talk about health issues early on. This involves having a doctor who knows them well and can do a thorough check into everything that is 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 and 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 Wellbeing

1. Do Not Wait for an Emergency to See a Doctor

Encourage and prioritize regular visits to healthcare providers, not just in emergencies. Having your family member see the doctor before a crisis is a necessary step in proactive care. Healthcare providers are there to help and support you.

2. Encourage Open Conversations About All Aspects of Health

Help the athlete in your family talk about mental health just as openly as physical health. Both are key to overall well-being. This can look very different for each person and will be unique to how the athlete in your family best works through and communicates difficult feelings and emotions.

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 of our teams should be the doctor and other key healthcare providers. Athlete health should be a priority in all stages of training. Support your athlete to bring their health care providers into the Special Olympics team by talking to them about big and little health issues. Special Olympics is about bravery (remember the oath!) and it is brave to be able to talk about health concerns.

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 to practice what you and your athlete are hoping to discuss with the healthcare team. You can use resources such as [About My Health](#) to help your athlete's healthcare team know how to best support them, and the [My Health Care Visit](#) tool to help your athlete keep track of the health concerns they want to bring up at a particular appointment. This practice can make appointments more productive and ensure the main health concerns are addressed.

Additional Resources

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](#). It helps to know something is wrong when you know what is right for you. [My Strong Mind](#) is a tool developed for Special Olympics athletes to help them know what is normal for them.

About the Team

This family snapshot 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 policies and services.

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

This study was funded by Special Olympics Canada. No endorsement by funders or collaborators is intended or should be inferred.