

# ***SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST***

## *A Fact Sheet for Coaches*

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### **FACTS**

Sudden cardiac arrest is a rare, but tragic event that claims the lives of approximately 500 athletes each year in the United States. Sudden cardiac arrest can affect all levels of athletes, in all sports, and in all age levels. The majority of cardiac arrests are due to congenital (inherited) heart defects. However, sudden cardiac arrest can also occur after a person experiences an illness which has caused an inflammation to the heart or after a direct blow to the chest. Once a cardiac arrest occurs, there is very little time to save the athlete, so identifying those at risk before the arrest occurs is a key factor in prevention.

### **WARNING SIGNS**

There may not be any noticeable symptoms before a person experiences loss of consciousness and a full cardiac arrest (no pulse and no breathing).

Warning signs can include a complaint of:

- Chest Discomfort
- Unusual Shortness of Breath
- Racing or Irregular Heartbeat
- Fainting or Passing Out

### **EMERGENCY SIGNS – Call EMS (911)**

If a person experiences any of the following signs, call EMS (911) immediately:

- *If an athlete collapses or faints suddenly during competition*
- *If a blow to the chest from a ball, puck or another player precedes an athlete's complaints of any of the warning signs of sudden cardiac arrest*
- *If an athlete does not look or feel right and you are just not sure*

### **How can I help prevent a sudden cardiac arrest from occurring?**

Daily physical activity, proper nutrition, and adequate sleep are all important aspects of life-long health. Additionally, coaches can:

- Ensure that all student athletes and parents have been given the fact sheet and returned the acknowledgement form
- Make a list of athletes who have informed you about a family history of sudden cardiac arrest (onset of heart disease in a family member before the age of 50 or a sudden, unexplained death at an early age)
- Ask if your school and the site of competition has an automatic defibrillator (AED) that is close by and properly maintained
- Learn CPR yourself
- Be aware that the inappropriate use of prescription medications or energy drinks can increase risk
- Encourage athletes to be honest and report symptoms of chest discomfort, unusual shortness of breath, racing or irregular heartbeat, or feeling faint
- Ensure your school has a policy in place regarding the management of student athletes who exhibit warning signs of a sudden cardiac arrest
- Ensure your school has a policy in place regarding the emergency management of students, for any reason, who exhibit life-threatening symptoms and require immediate medical attention, especially during extracurricular activities when the athletic trainer may not be available

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**What should I do if I think a student athlete has warning signs that may lead to sudden cardiac arrest?**

- 1. Keep the athlete out of play*
- 2. Inform the athlete's parent or guardian*
- 3. Document the athlete's symptoms, your response and your notification to parents or guardian*
- 4. Encourage the parent or guardian to seek medical attention right away*
- 5. Ensure the athlete does not return to play until the proper paperwork has been signed and returned by the parent or guardian*

**What should I do if a student athlete exhibits the emergency signs of a sudden cardiac arrest?**

- 1. Call 911*
- 2. If appropriate, begin CPR*
- 3. If available, utilize an AED*
- 4. Notify the athlete's parents or guardian*
- 5. Follow your school policy or your school Emergency Action Plan regarding the management of students with life-threatening symptoms*

**What other factors should I be aware of?**

Often, congenital heart defects are not obvious before an event occurs and sudden cardiac arrest can be the first symptom in some of these instances. Thus, reviewing the athlete's family history and ensuring a thorough pre-season evaluation by a health care provider is the key to preventing sudden cardiac arrest events.

Additionally,

- If an athlete suffers a sudden cardiac arrest, the athlete may not be able to protect themselves or "break their fall" and may sustain additional injuries
- During sudden cardiac arrest, the athlete may have jerking movements like a seizure
- Fainting during play or competition is a red flag and would require immediate medical attention