

Female Athlete Triad

When Exercising Becomes Too Much

By: Jaime Volpe

We all know being a girl comes with some with some unique biological characteristics—a main one of course is having periods. Being a female *athlete* also brings along some special concerns related to healthy eating, exercise and hormonal balance.

While exercise is so important, there is such thing as getting too much. For female athletes or highly active girls, it is important to balance physical activity with healthy eating, sleep, and relaxation. When girls start obsessing over exercise and cutting calories, their bodies can start responding in unhealthy ways. Girls in certain sports with high levels of physical conditioning may be more at risk, such as gymnastics, swimming, track or dance. (Teen guys can have other issues around bulking up or having to maintain a certain weight class.)

The harmful effects of over exercising for teenage girls make up the "Female Athlete Triad", a syndrome which includes three conditions: disordered eating and calorie restriction, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis.

1. Disordered eating and calorie restriction

Disordered eating and calorie restriction are two of the most harmful yet common behaviors that girls engage in. And it's no surprise: teen girls, in particular, are bombarded by confusing images in the media, peer pressure, and personal desires to be "skinny" that make it harder to feel beautiful. When girls are very active or play sports, they often become obsessive about how much they eat. Many girls try to lose weight in order to improve their athletic performance or maintain an "athletic body." This can cause them to restrict calories, purge, and potentially develop eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, the first part of the "Female Athlete Triad."

2. Amenorrhea

Excessive exercise combined with calorie restriction can also interfere with the level of estrogen, the female sex hormone that our bodies produce. Low levels of estrogen can disturb the menstrual cycle and result in a condition called amenorrhea, which is not getting your period for three months or more. Girls can also experience irregular menstrual cycles from over exercising. Amenorrhea is a scary condition because it can lead to infertility if left untreated over many years.

3. Osteoporosis

The final aspect of the Female Athlete Triad is bone loss, or osteoporosis. Poor nutrition, calorie restriction, and low estrogen can lead to weakened bones that stop growing, which may then cause broken bones or stress fractures. Plus, adolescence is the prime bone building years for girls, so it's very important for teens to treat the body well so their bones can grow properly.

As teen girls continue to develop into young adults, it is so important that they recognize this condition before it starts to harm their bodies and delays development. Whether you play multiple sports or simply engage in physical activity in your spare time, if you over do it over an extended time frame, you may develop any of these risk factors. And boys are at risk too- boys who restrict eating or use supplements to power up can also suffer major consequences. If you think you may have any or all of the symptoms of the Female Athlete Triad, do not let them go unnoticed. Talk to your pediatrician or parent. Your long term health is more important than your next run!

Of course, it's so important to keep moving to help our overall health, well-being, and mood. But you don't have to go to an extreme. Getting as little as 30 minutes of activity each day can benefit our hearts, lungs, muscles, bones, self-esteem, sleep, and general wellness- just remember that everything is better in moderation.