



Coach Toolkit for Supporting Athlete Health

Practical Strategies to Support Athlete Health and Well-Being

Beyond the Game: Coaching for Lifelong Athlete Wellness



Understanding Athlete Health Realities

In Canada, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) experience more health challenges than the general population. Many face barriers in accessing family doctors, routine care, and specialized clinicians familiar with IDD. This leads to higher rates of chronic conditions and missed opportunities for prevention.

Though universal healthcare exists, these gaps persist, and coaches are in a key position to help bridge them. By fostering healthy habits, encouraging confidence, and supporting self-advocacy when possible, coaches can contribute to athlete wellness in meaningful, supportive ways.

Empowering Athletes Through Inclusive Coaching

When coaches recognize and build on an athlete's strengths, they can spark profound personal change.

- Create safe, welcoming spaces where athletes feel comfortable talking about their health
- Encourage access to preventive screenings and routine care
- Support health literacy, help athletes understand what is typical and atypical health
- Reinforce independence and self-advocacy during conversations and team routines
- Healthy athletes are more confident, more independent, and more engaged—on and off the field

Coaches as Everyday Health Champions

You don't need to be a medical expert to make a lasting impact. Your everyday interactions can support better health outcomes for athletes. For additional resources tailored to Special Olympics athletes covering sleep, mindfulness, women's health, men's health, and health check-ins, visit our partner CAMH's page to explore materials created specifically with these athletes in mind.



Lead by Example and Establish Healthy Expectations:

- Encourage water at practice, say no to pop and sugary drinks
- Reinforce proper attire, gear, and self-care routines
- Celebrate athlete progress in sport and in healthy lifestyle habits
- Set tone and structure from the start of the season
- Guide athletes to show up prepared, positive, and ready to learn



Use Practice as a Health Learning Space:

- Check in with athletes as they arrive, ask how they're feeling or if anything hurts
- Discuss health topics during warm-ups, cooldowns, and water breaks
- Normalize conversations about hygiene, recovery, and emotional regulation
- Support routines around brushing teeth, using deodorant, and getting enough sleep
- Use [breathing techniques](#) like Star Breathing or provide stress-reducing tools like fidgets



Universal healthcare alone isn't enough, **coaches help close the gaps** by promoting healthy habits, building athlete confidence, and supporting self-advocacy.

Globally, Special Olympics has provided over 2 million free health screenings, proving how sport can be a powerful gateway to lifelong health.



“Coaches own the field of play. When you set expectations around health, you’re not just shaping athletes, you’re shaping confident, independent people.”

– Donna

Supporting Smart Nutrition and Hydration

What athletes eat and drink directly affects how they train and compete. Your guidance can make the difference.

✓ Everyday Nutrition Tips:

- Make hydration fun, encourage athletes to decorate water bottles and celebrate drinking water
- Talk about the benefits of carbohydrates and proteins in supporting energy and recovery
- Know your athletes’ health goals and offer nutrition ideas that align
- For additional nutrition education and guidance on sharing tips with athletes, explore the Coach Nutrition Course available on [Special Olympics Canada’s SOLearn Hub](#).

✓ Game Day Guidance:

- During buffet-style meals, help athletes make balanced choices by encouraging variety across food groups and mindful portions
- Help athletes choose smaller portions and avoid large scoops

- Walk them through meal options and offer gentle structure during busy events
- Avoid over-restriction, focus on education and awareness

Maximizing Healthy Athletes™ Opportunities

Healthy Athletes™ screenings give athletes access to care they may otherwise miss, especially those living independently.

✓ Your Role in Supporting Screenings:

- Know your athletes and help prioritize which disciplines to attend
- Check in with families to identify health needs and make screening plans
- Encourage attendance at health events and follow up afterward
- Promote mental wellness by giving space for emotional check-ins
- Reinforce the message: health screenings help athletes stay active for life

Working With Athletes Who Have Medical Conditions

Medical diagnoses do not exclude athletes from sport. On the contrary, being active can improve long-term health outcomes.

✓ How Coaches Can Help:

- Learn about your athletes' conditions so you know when help might be needed
- Understand common symptoms and talk through how athletes manage them
- Know who to call and how to respond in health-related situations
- Modify practices or routines if needed, adaptation builds confidence and safety
- Reinforce that sport participation is possible and beneficial for all athletes

Building a Culture of Wellness in Your Team and Chapter

Special Olympics delivers health programming across Canada, but it thrives because of local leaders like you.

✓ Keep the Momentum Going:

- Stay up to date on health programming through your Chapter
- Encourage athletes and families to access resources and events
- Bring your own ideas forward, whether around sleep, nutrition, mental well-being, or movement
- Collaborate with your Chapter to pilot or shape health programming that reflects your team's needs
- Your ideas help shape a stronger, more inclusive health culture for all



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Sport isn't just physical—it's preventive medicine. Coaches are part of the health system whether they realize it or not.

– Marion

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You are not just coaching sport—you are helping athletes build healthier, happier lives.

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