



THE FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD

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Do you have a sporty, disciplined and competitive daughter at home? Are you the dad who spends more time next to the sports field than next to the 'braai' over weekends? Are you the mom who buys energy drinks in bulk?

Those times are great. Hectic and tiring, but most often very rewarding – not just seeing your little princess achieve in her discipline, but also to see her grow up and develop emotionally.

Today I want to shed some light on her PHYSICAL development as well. We all know exercise and sports are good for physical development and overall health, but what happens if she overdoes it?

Have you ever heard of the FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD?

The Female Athlete Triad is defined as an interrelationship among **menstrual cycle changes, inadequate calorie intake and decreased bone density** in female athletes.¹ This occurs when **strenuous exercise** is combined with inadequate calorie intake which in turn leads to serious health consequences. It's more prevalent among teenagers, but also present in adult women.

It is useful to think of an athlete's calorie intake in terms of 'energy availability', which is the amount of energy consumed in the diet minus the amount of energy used during exercise. The amount of energy left over is the 'energy availability' to carry out other body functions, such as growth, development, and reproduction. If there is an imbalance, it will affect the body negatively.²

Athletes may present with 1, 2 or all 3 of the components of the Triad.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

In the beginning, the symptoms of the Female Athlete Triad may be subtle, but amenorrhea (absence of menstruation) is one of the easiest ways to detect the Triad. Stress fractures, weight change, eating disorders, bradycardia, arrhythmia and depression are all early symptoms commonly seen.³

HOW IS THE FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD TREATED?

The greatest challenge in treating female athletes with the Triad is making the initial diagnosis of the condition. Prevention and/or recognising the danger signs remain the best way to keep her safe. A multidisciplinary approach is usually necessary for recovery. Support from a primary care and/or sports physician, as well as a nutritionist or dietitian, psychiatrist or therapist, the team coach, and family members, is extremely important throughout the rehabilitation process.¹

The mainstay of treatment of the Triad is increasing calorie intake to improve energy availability. Due to all 3 components being multi-factorial in their own right, it is a difficult condition to treat.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Female Athlete Triad is a serious condition that affects a lot of young women. If left untreated, it has the potential to cause permanent long-term health problems which include osteoporosis, fractures, reproduction problems, infertility, cardiovascular disease and decreased immune functions.²

If you suspect your daughter might be at risk – a medical assessment by a sports physician/medical doctor is of paramount importance.

As parents, we want to see our children succeed on the track, but let's also make sure they succeed off the track by keeping them healthy.

For bookings or the full list of references please email me at info@physiofirst.co.za