

The Female Athlete Triad

by Sue Bowles

With dreams of World and Olympic Gold, Erica began skating at age 7 and trained hard to for 6 years. She is a beautiful, graceful and powerful singles skater. When her coach told her losing a few pounds would improve her performance, she immediately started counting calories and increased her on and off ice practice sessions.

She was too busy with practices and competitions to notice that her period had stopped — she was more worried about the stress fracture in her ankle affecting her ability to land the double axel.

Although Erica, her coach and her parents think that her intense training and disciplined diet are helping her performance, her regimen may actually be putting her skating and her health in jeopardy.

Sports and exercise are part of a balanced, healthy lifestyle. The Nike foundation did a study that showed girls who play sports are healthier; get better grades; are less likely to experience depression; and use alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs less frequently than girls who aren't athletes. But for some girls, not balancing the needs of their bodies and their sports can have major consequences.

Some girls who play sports or exercise intensely are at risk for a problem called female athlete triad. Female athlete triad is a combination of three conditions: eating disorders, amenorrhea and osteoporosis. A female athlete can have one, two, or all three parts of the triad.

Female athlete triad begins when a female athlete tries to lose weight primarily to improve their performance. The "eating disorders" that go with female athlete triad can range from avoiding certain types of food the skater thinks are "bad" (such as foods containing carbs and fats) to serious eating disorders like anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

Because a girl with female athlete triad is simultaneously exercising intensely and not eating enough calories, her weight may fall too low and she may experience a decrease in estrogen, the hormone that helps to regulate the menstrual cycle. As a result, a girl's periods may become irregular or stop altogether.

Some girls who participate intensively in sports may never even get their first period because they've been training so hard. Other girls may have had periods, but once they increase their training and change their eating habits, their periods may stop.

Low estrogen levels and poor nutrition, resulting in low calcium, vitamins and mineral intake, can lead to osteoporosis, a weakening of the bones due to the loss of bone density and improper bone formation. This condition can ruin a skater's career because it may lead to stress fractures and other injuries.

Not getting enough calcium during your teen years can have a lasting effect on how strong a girl's bones are later in life. Drinking milk is one of the best ways to assure that you receive enough calcium.

If you can't drink milk talk to your doctor or a nutritionist on how you can make sure you get enough calcium, vitamins and minerals in your diet.

Girls who develop female athlete triad have certain risk factors that are different than just worrying about how they look. Being a highly competitive athlete and participating in a sport that requires you to train extra hard is a risk factor.

Girls with female athlete triad care so much about their skating that they would do almost anything to improve their skating. Many coaches and parents encourage the skater to lose a few pounds thinking it will help their performance so focusing on weight becomes an important part of the training program and can put a girl at risk for an eating disorder.

Participation in sports where a thin appearance is valued can also put a girl at risk for female athlete triad. Coaches or judges may even tell some girls that losing weight would improve their scores.

The truth is, though, that losing those few pounds generally doesn't improve performance at all. A highly competitive athlete needs to eat more food not less than her sedentary peers.

In addition, for some competitive female athletes, problems such as low self-esteem, a tendency toward perfectionism, and family stress place them at risk for an eating disorder.

Here are a few tips to help skaters stay on top of their physical condition:

- Girls who are constantly on the go between school, practice, and competitions may be tempted to skip meals and snacks. But eating now will improve performance later, so stock your locker or bag with quick and easy fa-

vorites such as bagels, string cheese, unsalted nuts and seeds, raw vegetables, granola bars, and fruit.

- If you need help with an eating plan visit a nutritionist who works with athletes especially skaters. He or she can determine if you're getting enough key nutrients such as iron, calcium, and protein. They can also help you with a balanced eating plan that fits into your schedule. And if you need supplements, a nutritionist can recommend the best choices.
- Keep track of your periods. It's never normal not to have your period because you are "training hard". If you are a skater and are older than 16 and have not yet started your period tell your doctor!
- Skate for you. Pressure from parents, coaches or judges can turn a fun activity into a terrible experience. If you're not enjoying your skating, make a change. Remember: It's your body and your life. You will have to live with any damage you do to your body now.

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For more information on Female Athlete Triad try the following links

- <http://www.femaleathletetriad.org/faq.html>
- <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20000601/3367ph.html>
- <http://www.emedicine.com/sports/topic163.html>

References:

- http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/sports/triad.html
- Tortora, G.J. and Derrickson B. (2007). Introduction to the Human

Body: The Essentials of Anatomy and Physiology (7th Ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.