OPIOID USE AND MISUSE
EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET
Keeping Student-Athletes Safe

School athletics can serve an integral role in students' development. In addition to providing healthy forms of exercise, school athletics foster friendships and camaraderie, promote sportsmanship and fair play, and instill the value of competition.

Unfortunately, sports activities may also lead to injury and, in rare cases, result in pain that is severe or long-lasting enough to require a prescription opioid painkiller.[1] It is important to understand that overdoses from opioids are on the rise and are killing Americans of all ages and backgrounds. Families and communities across the country are coping with the health, emotional and economic effects of this epidemic.[2]

This educational fact sheet, created by the New Jersey Department of Education as required by state law (*N.J.S.A.* 18A:40-41.10), provides information concerning the use and misuse of opioid drugs in the event that a health care provider prescribes a student-athlete or cheerleader an opioid for a sports-related injury. Student-athletes and cheerleaders participating in an interscholastic sports program (and their parent or guardian, if the student is under age 18) must provide their school district written acknowledgment of their receipt of this fact sheet.

How Do Athletes Obtain Opioids?

In some cases, student-athletes are prescribed these medications. According to research, about a third of young people studied obtained pills from their own previous prescriptions (i.e., an unfinished prescription used outside of a physician's supervision), and 83 percent of adolescents had unsupervised access to their prescription medications.[3] It is important for parents to understand the possible hazard of having unsecured prescription medications in their households. Parents should also understand the importance of proper storage and disposal of medications, even if they believe their child would not engage in non-medical use or diversion of prescription medications.

What Are Signs of Opioid Use?

According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, 12 percent of male athletes and 8 percent of female athletes had used prescription opioids in the 12-month period studied.[3] In the early stages of abuse, the athlete may exhibit unprovoked nausea and/or vomiting. However, as he or she develops a tolerance to the drug, those signs will diminish. Constipation is not uncommon, but may not be reported. One of the most significant indications of a possible opioid addiction is an athlete's decrease in academic or athletic performance, or a lack of interest in his or her sport. If these warning signs are noticed, best practices call for the student to be referred to the appropriate professional for screening,[4] such as provided through an evidence-based practice to identify problematic use, abuse and dependence on illicit drugs (e.g., Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT)) offered through the New Jersey Department of Health.

What Are Some Ways Opioid Use and Misuse Can Be Prevented?

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The Sports Medical Advisory Committee, which includes representatives of NJSIAA member schools as well as experts in the field of healthcare and medicine, recommends the following:

- **The pain from most sports-related injuries can be managed with non-narcotic medications such as acetaminophen, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen, naproxen or aspirin. Read the label carefully and always take the recommended dose, or follow your doctor's instructions. More is not necessarily better when taking an over-the-counter (OTC) pain medication, and it can lead to dangerous side effects.[4]**
- **Ice therapy can be utilized appropriately as an anesthetic.**
- **Always discuss with your physician exactly what is being prescribed for pain and request to avoid narcotics.**
- **In extreme cases, such as severe trauma or post-surgical pain, opioid pain medication should not be prescribed for more than five days at a time;**
- **Parents or guardians should always control the dispensing of pain medications and keep them in a safe, non-accessible location; and**
- **Unused medications should be disposed of immediately upon cessation of use. Ask your pharmacist about drop-off locations or home disposal kits like Deterra or Medsaway.**

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
In consultation with
STATE OF NEW JERSEY
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
NJSIAA SPORTS MEDICAL
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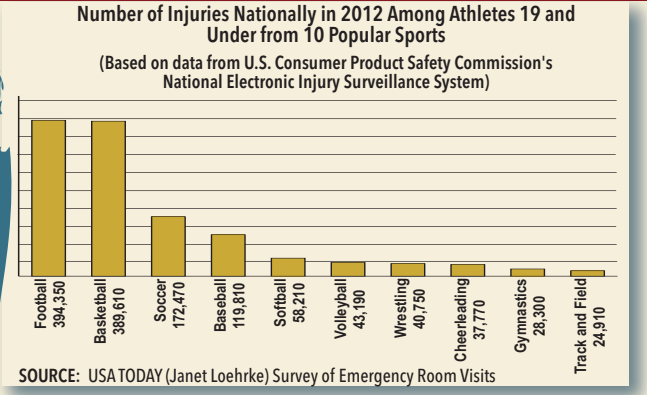

Even With Proper Training and Prevention, Sports Injuries May Occur

There are two kinds of sports injuries. Acute injuries happen suddenly, such as a sprained ankle or strained back. Chronic injuries may happen after someone plays a sport or exercises over a long period of time, even when applying overuse-preventative techniques.[5]

Athletes should be encouraged to speak up about injuries, coaches should be supported in injury-prevention decisions, and parents and young athletes are encouraged to become better educated about sports safety.[6]

What Are Some Ways to Reduce the Risk of Injury?[7]

Half of all sports medicine injuries in children and teens are from overuse. An overuse injury is damage to a bone, muscle, ligament, or tendon caused by repetitive stress without allowing time for the body to heal. Children and teens are at increased risk for overuse injuries because growing bones are less resilient to stress. Also, young athletes may not know that certain symptoms are signs of overuse.

The best way to deal with sports injuries is to keep them from happening in the first place. Here are some recommendations to consider:

PREPARE Obtain the preparticipation physical evaluation prior to participation on a school-sponsored interscholastic or intramural athletic team or squad.

CONDITIONING Maintain a good fitness level during the season and offseason. Also important are proper warm-up and cooldown exercises.

PLAY SMART Try a variety of sports and consider specializing in one sport before late adolescence to help avoid overuse injuries.

ADEQUATE HYDRATION Keep the body hydrated to help the heart more easily pump blood to muscles, which helps muscles work efficiently.

TRAINING Increase weekly training time, mileage or repetitions no more than 10 percent per week. For example, if running 10 miles one week, increase to 11 miles the following week. Athletes should also cross-train and perform sport-specific drills in different ways, such as running in a swimming pool instead of only running on the road.

REST UP Take at least one day off per week from organized activity to recover physically and mentally. Athletes should take a combined three months off per year from a specific sport (may be divided throughout the year in one-month increments). Athletes may remain physically active during rest periods through alternative low-stress activities such as stretching, yoga or walking.

PROPER EQUIPMENT Wear appropriate and properly fitted protective equipment such as pads (neck, shoulder, elbow, chest, knee, and shin), helmets, mouthpieces, face guards, protective cups, and eyewear. Do not assume that protective gear will prevent all injuries while performing more dangerous or risky activities.

Resources for Parents and Students on Preventing Substance Misuse and Abuse

The following list provides some examples of resources:

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence – NJ promotes addiction treatment and recovery.
New Jersey Department of Health, Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services is committed to providing consumers and families with a wellness and recovery-oriented model of care.
New Jersey Prevention Network includes a parent's quiz on the effects of opioids.
Operation Prevention Parent Toolkit is designed to help parents learn more about the opioid epidemic, recognize warning signs, and open lines of communication with their children and those in the community.
Parent to Parent NJ is a grassroots coalition for families and children struggling with alcohol and drug addiction.
Partnership for a Drug Free New Jersey is New Jersey's anti-drug alliance created to localize and strengthen drug-prevention media efforts to prevent unlawful drug use, especially among young people.
The Science of Addiction: The Stories of Teens shares common misconceptions about opioids through the voices of teens.
Youth IMPACTing NJ is made up of youth representatives from coalitions across the state of New Jersey who have been impacting their communities and peers by spreading the word about the dangers of underage drinking, marijuana use, and other substance misuse.

References

[1] Massachusetts Technical Assistance Partnership for Prevention
[2] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
[3] New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) Sports Medical Advisory Committee (SMAC)
[4] Athletic Management, David Csillan, athletic trainer, Ewing High School, NJSIAA SMAC
[5] National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases
[6] USA TODAY
[7] American Academy of Pediatrics

An online version of this fact sheet is available on the New Jersey Department of Education's Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Use webpage.
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