What Every Parent Needs to Know about Female Athlete Triad

The U.S. women's World Cup victory was the most watched soccer match in U.S. history. That’s good news for parents who are looking for inspirational role models for their daughters. It may also be a reminder to keep competitive pressures under control and watch out for health issues like female athlete triad.

Female athlete triad consists of 3 related medical conditions, but symptoms in even one area may require treatment. It's characterized by low energy, irregular menstrual periods, and decreased bone density.

Managing these symptoms can help girls to succeed on and off the playing field. As a parent, see what you can do on your own and in partnership with your family doctor and children’s school to prevent and treat female athlete triad.

Steps to Take at Home

1. Count calories. Girls may want to lose weight or simply underestimate how many calories they need when they’re very physically active. Show your daughters how to read food labels and use online calorie counters.

2. Eat frequently. If it’s difficult for your daughter to consume all the nutrients she needs in 3 sittings, serve additional smaller meals and snacks. Balance the menu with proteins, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats.

3. Stay hydrated. Athletes need water to regulate their body temperature and keep their energy up. Make sure your child drinks plenty of water before, during, and after exercise.
4. **Focus on calcium.** *The teen years are critical for building up bone mass to prevent fractures now and later in life.* Calcium-rich dairy products strengthen bones, and supplements can help too.

5. **Discuss eating disorders.** Eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia sometimes accompany female athlete triad. Express your concerns promptly if you see warning signs.

6. **Track menstrual periods.** Amenorrhea is one of the most obvious indicators of female athlete triad. By marking her cycle on a calendar, your daughter can learn to take charge of her own health. *Three consecutive months without a period or not having a first period by age 15 means it's time to see a doctor.*

7. **Cultivate a healthy body image.** Let your daughter know that she's beautiful at any size. Focus on being fit and strong rather than trying to reach some arbitrary weight.

8. **Resist comparisons.** Accepting our individuality is essential for self-esteem. Praise your daughter for making an effort and taking risks regardless of her ranking on the team.

**Steps to Take with Your Family Doctor and Child's School**

1. **Schedule a checkup.** A sports physical can help keep your most valuable player safe. In addition to questions about medical history, this may include tests for bone density, thyroid disease, and other factors.

2. **Follow your doctor's recommendations.** Your doctor may recommend lifestyle
changes and refer you to other health professionals, including nutritionists and mental health specialists. Be prepared to work together to address your daughter’ physical and emotional needs.

3. **Select appropriate activities.** Sports with revealing clothing or frequent weigh-ins may increase the risk of female athlete triad. Consider switching to alternative activities that may be less stressful.

4. **Assess coaching styles.** Coaches and trainers can have a big influence, so ensure they're encouraging girls to have fun. Steer clear of those who think it's worth risking your health just to win a game. *In fact, the National Collegiate Athletic Association says weight ought to be de-emphasized as a performance factor.*

Help your daughters enjoy the benefits of participating in sports while protecting their long-term health. By making smart choices about eating and exercise, girls can set their own personal records while staying fit for life.