Athletes With Chronic Medical Conditions Don’t Need To Watch From The Sidelines

By Dr. William J. Strimel

Athletes with chronic medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes or asthma, do not have to watch from the sidelines. Many competitive athletes have persevered with chronic conditions, including goalkeeper Tim Howard (Tourette syndrome), tennis star Venus Williams (autoimmune disorder), swimmer Mark Spitz (asthma), and basketball star Walt Frazier (diabetes). Regular exercise can help those with a chronic condition manage their symptoms and improve their health.

High Blood Pressure

About one in three adults have high blood pressure, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight and lower your blood pressure. While it is safe to exercise with high blood pressure, talk to your doctor about how your medications can affect you during exercise. For example, diuretics can lower your sodium and beta-blockers can limit heart capacity. Specialized testing, such as cardiopulmonary exercise testing, can sometimes be needed to identify the effect abnormal blood pressure response has on your heart’s performance.

High Cholesterol

The leading cause of death in runners is heart disease. Athletes, especially when participating in high-intensity exercise, can be even more vulnerable to heart disease than the average person if their cardiovascular risk profile is not properly addressed. Before beginning an exercise program you should have your cholesterol checked, and discuss your risk for heart attack and stroke with your physician. “Statin” drugs, the most commonly used drugs to reduce cholesterol, are highly effective but can increase the risk of muscle injury in those who exercise vigorously, as well as affect peak aerobic capacity. Take your medications and their side effects into consideration before you exercise.

Asthma

Between fifteen to twenty-five percent of athletes may have asthma-related signs and symptoms, says the National Athletic Trainers Association. Sports that involve sustained running, such as soccer or basketball, may increase symptoms. Ideally, asthma should be controlled at baseline, since excessive use of inhalers may increase the heart rate and affect athletic performance. Also, doing exercise warm-ups and cooldowns can help condition the lungs, prevent attacks, and reduce reliance on inhalers.

Diabetes

Exercise is an important therapeutic tool for those with diabetes. With proper precautions and monitoring, athletes with diabetes can participate in sports. Warm up and cool down for about five to ten minutes prior to exercising to help your body adjust. Be aware of your individual signs of hypoglycemia, which can include: excessive sweating, weakness/fatigue, shaking, lightheadedness, headaches, irritability, confusion, dizziness, hunger, and impaired vision. Since exercise, training, and competition can cause blood glucose levels to fluctuate, check blood glucose before, during, and up to four hours after exercise to understand how your body responds to the type of activities you perform.

If you are an athlete with a chronic disease, visit a sports-focused physician who can work with you to safely maximize your athletic performance. With precautionary measures, you can stay in the game.

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William J. Strimel, DO, FACC, FACP, is a cardiologist and director of Mercy Suburban Hospital’s Program for Comprehensive Care of the Athlete in East Norriton, 610-278-2219.