



## Supporting the Health of Women in Special Olympics

### What is this Coach's Corner about?

The unique health concerns of women in Special Olympics, including breast health and menstruation, do not always get enough attention but can have a direct impact on their ability to participate in sport and their overall health. For example, bras that do not fit well can lead to discomfort, pain, broken skin, and even serious infections if not treated. All women, but especially those who regularly participate in sport, need to take care of their breasts. This means that athletes should be checking for changes regularly and wearing a supportive and well-fitting bra. **SOFT** is a great strategy for attending to breast health. **SOFT** stands for:

1. **S**elect a bra that fits.
2. **O**bserve/See any changes.
3. **F**eel for anything abnormal.
4. **T**ell someone.

Additionally, athletes may not know which menstrual products are best to use when playing sports or what to do when they have menstrual pain. This can lead to embarrassment, avoiding sports, missing practices or quitting altogether. To manage period flow athletes can use properly fitting pads, tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual discs and period underwear. It's important athletes know to change these products regularly. Some good pain management strategies include using a heating pad or talking to a doctor about pain relief options.



### 5 Tips to Support Women's Health

#### 1. Create a Supportive and Safe Environment

Foster an open and understanding team culture where athletes feel comfortable discussing their health needs. Ensure that athletes who menstruate know they can speak to you when they are not feeling well and encourage athletes to seek support from a trusted caregiver or healthcare professional as needed. When addressing sensitive topics, particularly between a coach and an athlete of a different gender, it is recommended to involve another coach, parent, or volunteer with the appropriate expertise or of the same gender as the athlete. This ensures the athlete's comfort and upholds the principles of [Safe Sport and the Rule of Two](#).

#### 2. Know What to Look for

Pay attention to signs that an athlete may be experiencing breast discomfort or menstrual pain, such as frequently adjusting their bra, avoiding certain exercises, changes to energy levels or expressing discomfort. If an athlete reports any issues, work with them and their caregivers to identify the cause and find a solution, whether it's adjusting their sports bra, managing menstrual symptoms, or modifying their training regimen.



### 3. Direct Athletes Towards Information on Bra Fitting and Menstrual Products

Athletes may have questions about breast and menstrual health that are outside of your scope as a coach. Sharing health resources such as [Be Breast Aware](#) with your athletes is a great way to show support. Normalize the experience of learning about these aspects of health just like you do other aspects of health by not waiting to talk about them until an athlete brings them up.

### 4. Keep a Stock of Supplies

In cases of emergency, it helps to have a stock of menstrual products readily available during practices and competitions (e.g., in the team first aid kit). During team practice or orientation, you can take the athletes who menstruate aside and show them where the bag is so they can access it if needed.

### 5. Talk to Healthcare Professionals about Change

Encourage athletes to talk to their doctors or healthcare professionals regularly. It can be helpful to prepare for doctor visits, including making a list of any symptoms, changes, or concerns they have related to their breast health or menstruation. This could include discomfort, irregular periods, or any noticeable changes in breast size or shape. During the appointment, athletes can start the conversation by saying, "I have some questions about my breast health and my periods. Can we talk about that today?" This will help the doctor focus on what's important to the athlete.

It is also a good idea for athletes to bring a trusted caregiver with them for support, as they can support communication and provide emotional encouragement. To prepare, athletes might want to use tools like [My Health Care Visit](#), which can help them organize their thoughts. Some people find it helpful to write down their questions or even bring a photo if it helps explain what they are experiencing.

#### About the Team

This coach's corner was written by Dr. Laura St. John, Camille Williams, and Bridgette Lord. This project was led by Dr. Avra Selick from CAMH, together with Special Olympics Canada athletes, caregivers, coaches, researchers and community partners from across the country.

#### About H-CARDD

##### [Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#)

is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services.

H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively.

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