



Supporting the Health of Women in Special Olympics

What is this Snapshot 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 Environment

Foster an open and supportive environment where the athlete in your family feels comfortable discussing their health needs. This includes openly talking about menstruation and breast health in your family/household. Encourage your athlete to ask for help and support if they experience discomfort or health issues and model this with other women in the household. You can start by teaching your athlete what to look out for when it comes to breast and menstrual health. For example, how to feel for lumps or observe any changes in the skin around the breasts. Using resources like [Be Breast Aware](#) can be helpful to teach your athlete how to notice changes by learning how their breasts look and feel.

2. Know What to Look for

Watch for signs that the athlete in your family might be experiencing breast discomfort or discomfort related to menstruation. This could include frequently adjusting their bra, avoiding certain activities, or expressing discomfort. If they mention any issues, collaborate with them to find the cause and address it—whether that means adjusting their sports bra, managing menstrual symptoms, or modifying their routine. They may also want a bit of support in figuring out how to bring this to the attention of their coaches.



3. Have Necessary Supplies on Hand

Pads, tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual discs, and period underwear are examples of necessary supplies for menstruation. Collaborate with your athlete to figure out their preferred menstrual items, ensure these items are readily available, and that your athlete understands how to use them safely and/or dispose of them, as needed. Reusable menstrual products may require additional instruction about proper care to ensure cleanliness and longevity of the items. Additional menstrual supplies may include heating pads, extra underwear, and ibuprofen. Keep these products well stocked in the home of the athlete in your family and ensure they know where to find them and how to use them safely. It can also be helpful to use a mobile app or calendar to track their period so that they are prepared with necessary supplies.

4. Wear Proper-Fitting Bras

Wearing a well-fitting bra prevents discomfort and makes it easier to notice any changes in the breasts. Sports bras are a great option when being active as they provide extra support. You can help support your athlete measure their proper bra size at home and/or support your athlete in asking for help from an employee when they go bra shopping. It is also important that the athlete in your family replace their sports bras periodically, as they lose elasticity and support over time which may lead to discomfort.

5. Talk to Healthcare Professionals about Changes

Athletes should have regular check-ups with a healthcare provider to stay on top of their health and to discuss any changes. Before the appointment, make a list of any symptoms, changes, or concerns related to breast health or menstruation. This might include discomfort, irregular periods, or any changes in breast size or shape. It is also important to tell the healthcare provider about any family history of cancer. To prepare for their healthcare visit, athletes can use tools like [My Health Care Visit](#) to help them plan what they want to say. Some people find it helpful to write down their questions, practice what they want to say before their appointment or even bring a photo if it helps explain what they are experiencing. It can also be helpful for athletes to bring a trusted person with them for support.

About the Team

This family snapshot 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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