

# Illness Prevention for Athletes

## Prevention of Systemic Illnesses:

Diseases spread by airborne droplet spread (like viral infections such as colds and flu), person-to-person contact or by exposure to common sources of infection (like food poisoning). Neglecting general hygiene practices is often the major factor in the spread of infectious illnesses. Proper hygiene tips to help prevent an illness from spreading through a team are listed under “**DO**” and “**DON’T**” below.

Immunization is an important part of prevention. Flu shots (influenza vaccines) for athletes who compete during the flu season are good for limiting spread through a team, decreasing symptoms in a sick person, and avoiding interruptions in practice and competition. Other vaccinations to consider include Tetanus, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Meningitis (meningococcal), Measles/Mumps/Rubella (MMR) and Chicken Pox (Varicella). Fortunately, most school programs require most of these for entry. Athletes traveling to foreign countries should talk to their doctor to determine which vaccinations they may need such as yellow fever, typhoid fever, cholera, Japanese encephalitis and rabies. Vaccines may result in side effects or allergic reactions.

Fatigue, overtraining and improper nutrition are also risk factors for infection. Get enough rest and sleep. Workouts should be spaced out enough to provide good recovery time, and types of workout activities should be varied to maintain interest and focus. Minimize or handle life stress appropriately.

## When You Should and Shouldn't Exercise if Sick:

Whether you can or cannot work out is determined mainly by how sick you are. But, for example, if you have a systemic illness (like the flu, food poisoning or diarrhea) you should not work out at all. But if you have a mild cold you can do workouts like running or lifting weights at home. Strenuous workouts should be avoided. Many contact sports, like boxing and wrestling use different types of workouts – workouts with contact with other participants and workouts without contact. **If you are contagious, you should not work out with partners from your team or work out in the gym or workout room.**

A "neck check" may help you decide if you should work out. You can exercise when sick if your symptoms are all above the neck (like stuffiness, mild sore throat, itchy eyes) and if your symptoms do not worsen with exercise. Try a reduced workout first. If symptoms are tolerable or improve during exercise, gradually increase the intensity. But if your symptoms are severe, below the neck, or generalized (like fever, muscle aches, productive cough, vomiting or diarrhea) it may mean more serious illness and you should rest. If you are this sick, stay home and do not practice or compete until your symptoms have resolved completely. Having one athlete miss a practice is better than having the whole team miss a competition.

**DO:**

- ◆ Wash hands frequently with soap and water, especially before you eat and after you go to the bathroom.
- ◆ Minimize contact with people who are obviously sick, including teammates. If you know that a cold or flu is spreading in your community you should avoid crowds, unnecessary travel and close contact with young children. Avoid touching common surfaces in public places, such as countertops or doorknobs.
- ◆ Use insect repellents in areas where insect-borne disease like Lyme disease or West Nile Virus are risks.
- ◆ Protect ice sources like ice buckets and ice machines to avoid contamination. Allow access to ice chests only by designated personnel like trainers. Ice scoops should be frequently sanitized. Do not put your hands in the ice.
- ◆ Keep your own name-labeled water bottle for your use only.
- ◆ Get enough rest and sleep.
- ◆ Eat a well-balanced diet (with the right amounts of calories, carbs, protein and fats) and stay properly hydrated.

**DON'T:**

- ◆ Don't share water bottles, sports drinks or soda cans.
- ◆ Don't share personal items, such as toothbrushes, mouth guards or cosmetics.
- ◆ Don't work out if you are badly fatigued, too tired or too ill.

This handout is adapted from the book "*Championship Nutrition and Performance: The Wrestler's Guide to Lifestyle, Diet and Healthy Weight Control*" by Nicholas Rizzo, M.D. This handout should not be considered complete nor a substitute for evaluation and treatment by a physician. Always consult your doctor first.