



Supporting Special Olympics Athletes in Getting a Good Night's Sleep

What is this Coach's Corner about?

As a coach, it's easy to focus on athlete training alone, but the mental and physical recovery of your athletes is just as important. You also play a crucial role in encouraging a healthy lifestyle, including prioritizing sleep. [Sleep is a critical pillar of health](#), directly impacting performance, recovery, and overall well-being. Without sufficient sleep, athletes may experience slower reaction times, impaired decision-making, and reduced energy levels — factors that ultimately affect game-day performance.

Why Does Sleep Matter?

- **Enhances Performance:** Athletes who prioritize sleep perform better due to improved memory consolidation, learning, and recovery. Sleep allows the brain to process, and later implement, the day's training and experiences, which is crucial for improving skills and muscle memory.
- **Boosts Recovery:** During sleep, muscle repair and cell regeneration occur, which are vital for recovery after strenuous workouts. Adequate sleep also helps to manage physical pain and reduces the risk of injuries.
- **Supports Mental Health:** Athletes are often under pressure, and sleep plays a major role in managing stress, anxiety, and emotions. Poor sleep can worsen these mental states, which leads to decreased focus and motivation, and ultimately impact training and performance including during competition.

How much Sleep is needed?

Quality sleep is an essential component of an athlete's overall health and performance. According to [Canada's first-ever 24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#) by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP), adults aged 18-64 years should aim for 7 to

9 hours of good-quality sleep on a regular basis, with consistent bed and wake-up times. Ensuring that your athletes prioritize sufficient sleep will enhance their ability to recover, focus, and perform at their best during practices and competitions. While 7 to 9 hours is a good guideline, the exact need may vary depending on the athlete.

How can Coaches Support Quality Sleep?

As a coach, you can both be a role model and help to increase athlete awareness about the importance of sleep. This may mean integrating discussions about healthy sleep habits into your training sessions. Encouraging athletes to establish regular sleep routines and to avoid habits that negatively impact sleep, such as late-night screen use, caffeine and heavy meals before bed.



5 Tips to Support Quality Sleep

1. Increase Athletes Awareness about the Importance of Sleep

Discuss with athletes how adequate sleep enhances physical performance, cognitive function, and emotional regulation. Use examples of how lack of sleep can lead to injuries and reduced focus, and how good sleep can improve their performance and ability to manage performance nerves. The good news is that being active during the day can help people get a good night's sleep!

2. Promote Sleep Hygiene Practices

We know that athletes may have inconsistency in their sleep schedules, resulting from early practice, competition related travel, and sometimes sleeping away from home as a result of competition. Encourage athletes to think about strategies that they can use to get better sleep no matter where or when they are getting ready for bed. This might include: trying to have a consistent sleep schedule when possible (go to sleep and wake up at the same time each day), thinking about what to bring on overnight competition travel that will support sleep (e.g. earplugs, eye mask, white noise, prioritizing sleep), limiting screen time before bed, keeping electronic devices out of the bedroom, minimizing noise and light, and keeping the room cool.

3. Set Realistic Sleep Goals

Help athletes establish achievable sleep goals based on their training schedules and commitments. Emphasize the need for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night and encourage them to prioritize this amidst their busy lives. Some people like to use their phones or smart watches to help track their sleep and remind them when to start winding down.

4. Share Relaxation Techniques

For some athletes, stress or anxiety before a competition or related to life events can make it difficult to get a good night's sleep. You can share the same techniques for pre-competition anxiety (e.g. deep breathing, mindfulness, or yoga) to help them wind down before bedtime.

5. Encourage Accountability

Sometimes peer pressure can be helpful! Foster a culture of accountability among teammates where they can check in on each other's sleep habits and support one another in prioritizing sleep.

Additional Resources

For more information on why sleep is important and additional tips on how to get a good night's sleep, you can read this [Article](#) and this [Module](#). For Canadian statistics on sleep, check out this [Link](#).

About the Team

This coach's corner was written by Dr. Janet McCabe and students from the Ontario Tech nursing program. 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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