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Three ways a bystander can save an athlete's life

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There is always a degree of risk involved with playing sports, such as sprains, strains, and concussions. Most sports injuries are minor to moderate. But rare situations that involve the heart can create life-or-death emergencies.

No one can forget when Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin took a hard hit to the chest and collapsed during a televised NFL game in January 2023. Hamlin experienced commotio cordis, which is an abnormal heart rhythm caused by a direct blow to the chest.

Immediate on-field CPR, AED use, and following sudden cardiac arrest protocols saved Hamlin's life in this rare situation that could happen to athletes at any level. Parents, volunteers, and coaches can help save a student-athlete's life by being prepared to follow three basic steps while waiting for paramedics to arrive.

1. Learn CPR.

Time is the enemy when the heart has stopped—the longer blood flow is interrupted, the greater the risk of organ damage and death. That's why it's crucial to give cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) immediately during sudden cardiac arrest. Giving proper CPR can triple the chances of survival according to the American Heart Association (AHA).

Hands-only CPR can be performed by untrained people while waiting for help to arrive. This procedure uses rhythmic chest compressions at a rate of 100 to 120 beats per minute to help circulate blood.

You don't need a medical background to give CPR. Local community organizations host CPR classes just about every month. CPR training will give you the confidence and skills to act without hesitation if a player's heart stops. If you were CPR-certified two or more years ago, take a refresher course to learn the latest techniques.

2. Locate and use an AED.

The heart pumps because of natural electrical pulses. When sudden cardiac arrest disrupts those pulses, an automated external defibrillator (AED) can stimulate the heart back into a rhythmic heartbeat.

Anyone can use an AED, and more public places like sports complexes, community buildings, and shopping centers have them readily available. AEDs are portable devices that are designed for use by non-medical bystanders. Using voice prompts, lights, and written instructions, the device will talk you through how to use it step-by-step until emergency responders arrive.

If your sports program has an AED, make sure you know where it is and how to access it. Advocate for an AED if your sports program doesn't have one by speaking with your administrators and local emergency medical services (EMS) about where to start.

3. Put an emergency action plan in place.

Does everyone in your sports program know how to help if an athlete is seriously hurt? It's difficult to think clearly in the heat of the moment—an emergency action plan brings order to chaos by outlining team leaders' roles and responsibilities when a player needs emergency care.

All athletic programs, from youth sports to the pros, should have an emergency action plan in place for a smooth and fast response to life-threatening injuries. Regularly going over the steps is key to help everyone feel comfortable with the plan. For example, running through mock scenarios during practice and refreshers on CPR and AED use.

The benefits of playing sports far outweigh the risks for most athletes. If you or your child has unusual symptoms or a personal/family history of heart problems, talk with a healthcare provider about whether they need to see a sports cardiologist for pre-participation screening. A sports cardiologist can provide noninvasive screening and testing for heart conditions, such as arrhythmias, valve problems, and structural differences in the heart.

At any level of sports, bystanders, parents, and staff should be prepared for the unexpected. Rare situations can turn tragic without fast action—and the onus is on all of us to do our part.