

Guard the Game: The link between athletes and heart screenings

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

PRINT SCRIPT

As children go back to school, doctors' offices are filled with kids needing check-ups, immunizations, and in some cases, heart screenings.

This is particularly the case for athletes, according to Frank Han, MD, pediatric cardiologist with OSF HealthCare.

"Every time people go back to school, there is a need for heart screenings to help look for heart problems in children," Dr. Han says.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) conducted a 10-year review of sudden death during sporting activities. The objective was to characterize the demographics and causes of sudden cardiac death during sports played in Australia. Nearly 20,000 autopsies were conducted between 2006 and 2015. Most deaths were from adults.

The findings showed the small number of children who died from heart conditions either were arrhythmogenic or presumed arrhythmogenic, producing or tending to produce cardiac arrhythmia. Or the kids had inherited cardiomyopathies, an acquired or hereditary disease of the heart muscle.

That's why Dr. Han recommends parents speak to their children's pediatricians to make sure they're aware if their child has a heart condition. If the pediatrician senses the child may have a problem, they'll recommend they be seen by a cardiologist for further evaluation.

"The general screening to start off is an EKG in the primary care office. After that, along with an assessment of family history, that person may be referred for an echocardiogram or a stress test to see if there's any issues in the heart valves, or if the heart muscle is too thick," Dr. Han says. "One of the major uses of the exercise stress test is to try and simulate the hardest possible exercise that person might do. Then we will put all the information together in our visit to figure out if there is an issue."

While it can be hard, especially for younger children, to know the signs of a heart condition, it's important to listen if they think something feels unusual.

"They may say things like their chest is 'beeping,' or their chest is 'pounding.' In older children, they may give you a variety of descriptions, that there's some difficulty with exercise. This can be chest pain, shortness of breath, or their heart is pounding, particularly when they exercise," Dr. Han says.

Dr. Han says all heart conditions aren't caught when the person is younger.

"Some heart conditions that you're born with don't really show up as a kid, like genetic conditions of the heart that may show up at a later age," he says. "The electrocardiogram and ultrasound of the heart are designed to pick that up if it shows up later in age."

Dr. Han adds it's very important to know your family health history. If your family has a history of heart conditions, he recommends speaking with your primary care provider and potentially being screened by a cardiologist.