

Depression in Female Athletes

Athlete Information Sheet

What is Depression?

Depression is a common medical condition that often presents as a low mood that does not go away over time. Depression interferes with individuals lives, making it hard to cope with everyday activities.

What does Depression look like?

Some of the common symptoms of depression include:

- Reduced quality of sleep (sleeping a lot, waking frequently, or difficulty getting to sleep (insomnia))
- Having no energy and feeling more tired than usual
- Feelings of worthlessness and helplessness
- Feelings of low self-esteem
- Changes in appetite or eating patterns
- Sadness or emotional 'numbness' (inability to feel an emotion i.e., happy or sad)
- Loss of pleasure in activities that were previously enjoyable
- Excessive irritability or anxiety
- Poor concentration or motivation
- Feeling guilty
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Thinking about death or thoughts of self-harm.



How Common is Depression?

- Anyone can experience depression - in 2020, 13% (660,000) of New Zealanders were diagnosed with depression
- A study conducted by HPSNZ in 2017 found that 21% of elite athletes met the criteria for moderate depression. This is similar to athlete groups in Australia and the USA
- Symptoms of depression may be more common in female athletes compared to male athletes. A survey conducted by the HPSNZ WHISPA group in 2019 found that 11% of elite female athletes had been diagnosed with depression or anxiety at some time

What causes Depression?

A range of factors may contribute to depression in any individual including:

- Genetics (family history)
- Biochemical factors (brain chemistry)
- Illness
- Personality type
- Age
- Long term pressures
- Stressful or traumatic events

There are also risk factors that are unique to the athletic population, which may increase their risk of depression, including:

- Injury or overtraining
- Concussion
- Pending or after retirement from sport
- Younger Athletes
- Being an individual sports person (compared to teams)
- Performance expectations

What to do if you are concerned about Depression?

- General Practitioners are very experienced in managing depression and should be consulted early.
- HPSNZ Athletes may contact the sport specific Medical Director or NSO Psychologist for support.
- HPSNZ has clinical psychologists, who are independent of sport, available within the Auckland and Cambridge training centres.
- For mental health support independent of sport, athletes may utilise 'INSTEP' providers.
- If there is an urgent mental health risk, or a concern regarding self-harm, call Healthline (0800 611 116) or the local DHB Mental Health Crisis Team

Want to know more?

The New Zealand Ministry of Health runs an excellent on-line mental health education programme, which introduces mental health issues to non-medical, non-psychology trained individuals.

It provides an excellent grounding in recognising and understanding mental health issues and is highly recommended.

For further information see <https://www.blueprint.co.nz/workshops/4-mh101/>

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