

## **The Female Athlete Triad**

### *What is the Female Athlete Triad?*

When girls and women are pressured to meet unrealistic weight goals as a means of improving performance and/or visual appeal, many of them slip into a pattern of disordered eating which in turn often leads to a serious eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia, amenorrhea (absence of menses), and bone loss (osteoporosis). Although any of these can occur in isolation, the emphasis on weight loss often begins a cycle in which all three occur in sequence - hence the term "Female Athlete Triad."

### *Who is at Risk?*

All athletes are at risk if they are pressured to lose weight to meet an unrealistic standard of body fat or body weight. This pressure may come from the coach, the parents, teammates, or the athlete herself. While the incidence may be higher in elite athletes, the Female Athlete Triad can occur at any age or level of skill if the pressure or desire to excel leads an athlete to attempt to lose weight through severe dietary restrictions or other inappropriate methods. The prevalence of disordered eating among female athletes has been reported to range from 51% to 62% depending on the activity.

### *What are the Consequences of the Triad?*

Sports performance: Muscle mass as well as fat is lost during extreme dieting and performance may deteriorate. Other side effects of poor nutrition can result in fatigue, electrolyte imbalance, anemia, and depression -- all of which contribute to poor performance. Health problems: There are a number of serious medical complications arising from the Female Athlete Triad. Some of these are reversible, but others permanently impair the major organ systems, including the kidneys, heart, gastrointestinal tract, and skeleton. In addition, there are problems with fluid and electrolyte balance, the central nervous system, and endocrine function. The final outcome for some young athletes is death.

*Information from Women Sport International Task Forces website.*

*Compiled by the Massachusetts Eating Disorder Association, 617-558-1881.*