



Sports Medicine and Research Science Mental Health Subcommittee
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What Can U SPORTS Athletes Do in an Uncertain Time?

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The U SPORTS Sports Medicine and Research Science Committee consists of representatives from all conferences who provide expertise and leadership in helping member institutions promote a healthy and safe environment for athletes and their supports. In response to the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, sport and society nationwide, a sub-committee developed resources that can be used by all levels of the U SPORTS membership to navigate through mental health challenges that may be experienced.

Many are finding themselves in uncharted waters, living in an unusual and uncertain time. Since the constitution of the modern Canadian Interuniversity Athletic Union (CIAU) in 1961, sports have continued to grow and evolve across universities from coast to coast. Even during the two world wars (1914-1918, 1939-1945), facilities and sports continued to develop across the country. Although the Olympics have been boycotted and cancelled due to political conflict and wars, and the Tokyo 2020 Games were postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, university sports have never been disrupted by a major world event until now.

The early impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt in the cancellation of several U SPORTS National Championships (men's and women's hockey, men's and women's volleyball). Student athletes also found themselves saying early and unexpected good-byes to teammates as schools vacated and transitioned to virtual learning. Physical distancing measures prohibited group meetings and workouts; and the closure of gyms, pools and fitness facilities made accessing the usual workout locations impossible. All involved in University sport are aware of the sacrifices made for the health and well-being of Canadian communities!



Evolution of emotional response during Covid-19

The first few weeks following the Covid-19 “shut down” were met with shock, confusion, uncertainty, and a gradual adjustment to a new schedule. Students refocused on completing the school year, and graduates faced an anticlimactic end of their undergraduate experience. The need to study and complete academic requirements gave student athletes a distraction and a reason to maintain some semblance of a schedule. The completion of the Winter semester ushered in the next phase of transition to this ‘new reality’.

The first several weeks after exams will be met with another transition - to a new phase without routine or schedule. Physical distancing stipulations continue to prevent group gathering or training, and many jobs that had been lined up are no longer available. The most common first things to “let go” are sleep schedules, wake times, regular exercise, and any semblance of productivity. Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness and unimportance, and efforts need to be made to stay connected with teammates and friends via virtual platforms.

As of May 16, 2020- this situation of pandemic shut down for 7 weeks. Some people emerged during the initial “honeymoon phase” with bounds of energy to carry people through with inspiring workouts posted on social media; however, the vast majority of people have started to experience frustration, disillusionment, and increased irritability. Sadness, loneliness, and anxiety are all present behind the scenes.

Athletes with pre-existing mental illness

Major disruptions to society and lifestyle can have a significant impact on individuals who suffer from mental illness of any type. Anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and other types of illness can become triggered and amplified. Coping mechanisms become strained and healthy outlets such as access to training centres and teammates are not available. Isolation is fuel on the fire for depression (although it may help reduce anxiety); while anxiety heightens in terms of uncertainties and fear of becoming ill with Covid-19 (the athlete or their families).

Remember: Sport Equips Us with Special Powers

Concepts like “Mental Toughness,” “Resilience,” and “Adversity Tolerance” are often spoken about in the sports world. They are applied in terms of persistence in competition, maintenance of intensity, and task completion to the end goal. Athletes and those embedded in the sports world are equipped with gifts and talents beyond the competition or training venue; and it is those qualities that make them not only tenacious competitors, but leaders in life as well. Illustrations of this strength and leadership are evident throughout social media and the internet as athletes, coaches, and IST staff have posted inspirational messages, extended support to complete strangers, and provided examples of creative workouts while in isolation. In today’s age of technology, isolation doesn’t have to mean “alone.” Even if group training is prohibited, there are creative ways to make it concurrent and connected.



Special powers do not diminish humanity. One can feel for our family and friends whose businesses are shuttered and finances are in peril. In these times we will experience a myriad of emotions ranging from guilt (for even thinking about sport at this time), to sadness, fear, or comfort. Friends try to find ways to bring laughter as an oasis in this storm. Allow it.

BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT, BEING A YOUNG, HEALTHY ATHLETE DOES NOT MAKE YOU IMMUNE TO COVID-19

Forward Focus

Whose job is it to promote calm throughout this uncertainty? There is no algorithm to dictate who weathers through a global pandemic better than others. Some athletes are managing through this uncertainty and disruption with calm reserve and optimism, while some coaches and administrators are having more difficulty maintaining composed focus. All are in this together, we must pick each other up, and find a way to help each other through this the best way we can.

Role of the Internet and Social Media

Many athletes have removed themselves from social media platforms because of the constant, pervasive bombardment of apocalyptic catastrophization. Others have taken advantage of the global reach of social media platforms to serve as ambassadors of reason to major sporting bodies about the need to prioritize the health and safety of athletes above political and financial motives. The bottom line is, athletes and sport personnel need to choose what works for them at this time.

Which path will YOU take?



One path follows forward-thinking: continuing to train and maintain goals, while utilizing supports and trusting that your opportunity will still come. Another path follows uncertainty, with swirling insecurity about a future that has a vague outline of school, housing, family and finances. Yet others follow declining trails of desolation, negativity, sadness, frustration, and feeling of loss.

Questions about Return to Sport

As isolation stretches on and uncertainty grows, it is natural to wonder about many important things as it pertains to varsity sport and school.

Questions may include:

1. When can we train as a group again?
2. When will school return?
3. Will there be a season in the first semester?
4. How will this change our team? The IST? The coaching staff?

Answers as of May 16, 2020:

1. At this time, the country is slowly emerging from the lockdown of sports and group training. No training facilities are open, and athletes are training individually at their homes across the country, using whatever creative means they can find. Sport and school authorities are working hard behind the scenes to develop the potential strategies that will be used to determine when it will be safe to return to group training. The return to training will likely not occur for all sports at the same time, as all sports offer unique characteristics that need to be considered.
2. Schools across the country are developing strategies for their approach to classes in the Fall of 2020. As Spring and Summer semesters are being offered virtually, it would not be a stretch to consider that schools are preparing for several different scenarios in the Fall. Virtual learning may be one of them.
3. The beginning of the season will follow a progression from determination of how the sport participation can occur safely to gradual return to group training (likely in various stages). The timing of this is still unknown at this time.
4. The constitution of the IST and athlete support group will be determined by the fiscal reality of the post-Covid situation. This may not be known at this time.

There is a LOT of uncertainty- about the present and the future. What can you do?

As university athletes, you have all overcome challenges – selections, losses, injury and have grown because of that. No doubt you will use this challenge to come out even stronger. Exercise is an important piece to staying physically and mentally healthy as well as staying conditioned for the eventual return of competition. While many team sports require contact with others, there are still many individual skills that you can work on at home or independently outside.

This is an excellent time to rehab injuries you might have been nursing at the end of your season or to ‘prehab’ to prevent further injuries when full training can resume. If your Integrated Support Team (IST) members have noted any physical deficiencies or performance gaps, these can be addressed during your home training. Before embarking on any training or rehab programs, ensure you connect with your therapists and S&C coaches to ensure whatever training you are undertaking is consistent with your designed training plan. There are many resources online for training thus it is imperative you are getting appropriate and safe advice. Avoid sharing work out and sport equipment with others and use hand sanitizer regularly before, during and after exercise. Please refrain from exercising if you are feeling ill. Most sport medicine physicians and family physicians are providing virtual care (and in person care as required) so be sure to contact them for guidance about return to training after an illness.

Nutrition plays an important role in our health, well-being and fitness. During this time of increased stress, it is easy to succumb to overeating or excess snacking. When you feel stressed or bored, try to use one of the above strategies to connect to others instead of heading to the kitchen. Set up your work out area away from the kitchen if possible. Try to keep to daily schedules to avoid skipping meals which might lead to snacking or overeating later. As much as possible, keep healthy eating options available at home and avoid purchasing junk food. Focus on high fiber, high protein snacks to keep you feeling full longer. You will likely need to reduce your overall intake due to decreased training volumes. However, don't forget to stay hydrated with (low calorie) fluids.

COVID-19 AND NUTRITION

Stay strong by eating healthy

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus.

Common symptoms



Dry cough



Fever



Short of breath

Who is at risk?

You can get sick from COVID-19 at any age, but you are at a **higher risk of severe complications** if you are an **older adult** or **have a medical condition or weakened immune system**.



How can I stay healthy during the pandemic?

Focus on your nutritional health

- Eat vegetables, fruits and whole grains
- Eat protein foods (e.g. eggs, beans, lower-fat dairy products)
- Limit highly processed foods
- Drink water to stay hydrated
- Eat mindfully (i.e. eat when hungry, stop when full)



Tip: Stock up on nutrition-packed foods that last more than one week.



Fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables



Dried and canned pulses



Whole grains



Dried fruits, nuts and seeds



Eggs



Canned fish and vegetables

True or False?

There are specific foods or nutrients I could consume in addition to eating a healthy diet to prevent COVID-19.

FALSE

Although no specific foods, dietary supplements or natural health products will prevent an infection, eating a healthy diet, along with other healthy behaviours, strengthens your immune system's ability to fight infections.

Other healthy behaviours:



Go grocery shop once per week or less to limit exposure



Build physical activity into your day (e.g. walking, home workouts, yardwork)



Maintain good sleep habits (e.g. 7-9 hours/night)



Stay connected with family and friends (e.g. virtual family dinner)

Where can I find reliable information on COVID-19?



Government of Canada



World Health Organization



Dietitians of Canada
Les diététistes du Canada

Sources

Government of Canada, World Health Organization and Dietitians of Canada websites. Vector images courtesy of Freepik and Canada's Food Guide.

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Canadian Nutrition Society
Société canadienne de nutrition
cns-scnc.ca

It is also important to keep in touch socially with teammates, coaches and working members of your Integrated Support Team (Athletic or Physiotherapists, Strength & conditioning coaches, mental performance coaches). Virtual meetings with teammates will keep you connected and ready to achieve your goals when you can train together again. Be creative with virtual meet-ups – training competitions, games, book clubs, etc. can keep you united while also having fun. Meetings with coaches can help to outline your personal and team objectives and work on your off-field skills and principles (including your mental performance skills). Don't be afraid to reach out to members of your team if you are struggling to cope with this new landscape. When training restrictions are lifted, ensure you gradually increase your training load to prevent any injuries that may result from decreased training volume.

Lastly, if you are struggling with depression, anxiety or other emotions of uncertainty and finding motivation to train, it is important to know where to go for help.

The most important things you can do right now are whatever it takes to keep moving forward.

Know where to go

The type of struggles you are having may dictate what level of support you need.

- a. Your **sports medicine physician** would be a great first contact to check in about whatever symptoms you are having to ensure you have the right connections, and that your entire body is being looked after from head to toe!
- b. If you are worried about how these interruptions will affect your maintenance of fitness and mental strategies for performance and anxiety, then **Mental Performance Consultants** can support that.
- c. **Psychologists and counsellors** can assist in the delivery of psychotherapy to discuss mood changes, anxiety and sleep strategies (as well as other things).
- d. For more severe symptoms such as severe anxiety, or low (or high) mood that lasts for a week or more and interferes with function and self-care, a **Sports Psychiatrist** (or general psychiatrist) would be the best service to access. If anxiety, disordered eating, mood or OCD symptoms (obsessions and compulsions) are more difficult to manage, or if insomnia or panic attacks are become more regular, a Psychiatrist should be involved in your care. If hopelessness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts are occurring, referral to a sports psychiatrist is a must.
- e. All of these providers can work together to provide comprehensive and complementary care for the athlete.

Available resources:

Specialized mental health support is available. Some U SPORTS institutions have sports psychiatrists and psychotherapists on staff, while others have resources in the community that they can connect you with. Student Wellness services at your school can also provide support and direction.

Other mental health supports include:

- Local crisis services
- **24/7** Crisis Service Canada (1-833-456-4566, or 1-866-277-3553 (Quebec))
- Self-help/online resources (e.g. www.cpa.ca/psychologyfactsheets)
- Talking to a friend, partner, or family member