



SPECIAL OLYMPICS HEALTHY ATHLETES

Overview

Healthy Athletes is a Special Olympics program that provides free health screenings to Special Olympics athletes in seven different health areas (vision, hearing, oral health, healthy lifestyles, general fitness, podiatry, and sports physicals). Offered in a fun, welcoming environment, Healthy Athletes screenings remove the anxiety and trepidation people with intellectual disabilities often experience when faced with a visit to a doctor or dentist.

In addition to screenings, Healthy Athletes also provides eyeglasses, sunglasses, hearing aids, mouthguards and other free items to athletes who attend.

With Healthy Athletes, Special Olympics has become the largest global public health organization specifically for people with intellectual disabilities, holding screening events in more than 100 countries.

Data from Healthy Athlete screenings are collected into the Healthy Athletes Software (HAS) system. HAS is the largest database of health data for people with intellectual disabilities in existence.

The Importance and Impact of Special Olympics Healthy Athletes

The need for Special Olympics Healthy Athletes is great. Despite a mistaken belief that people with intellectual disabilities receive the same or better health care than others, they typically receive sub-standard care or virtually no health care at all.

Healthy Athletes is one example why Special Olympics is not simply “nice”, it is vitally important and has contributed to immense improvements to the health care of people with intellectual disabilities and public policy regarding people with intellectual disabilities.

Healthy Athletes doesn't simply benefit Special Olympics athletes. By training health care professionals worldwide who then go back to their practices with increased knowledge of and compassion for people with intellectual disabilities, thus creating more inclusive medical practices.

Healthy Athletes is also a force in changing policies that affect people with intellectual disabilities. Healthy Athletes research service and education initiatives have contributed to a number of steps forward including the establishment of the American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry and the signing of the Special Olympics Sports and Empowerment Act of 2004. The Sports and Empowerment Act will expire in 2009; Special Olympics is currently working to get the bill re-authorized.

Since its official launch in 1997, Healthy Athletes has provided more than 700,000 health screenings to Special Olympics athletes worldwide, trained more than 75,000 health care professionals on the specific health concerns faced by people with intellectual disabilities, and given more than 50,000 pairs of eyeglasses to those that need them free of charge.



Healthy Athletes screenings have found that Special Olympics athletes are at increased risk of secondary health issues:

- 44% have obvious, untreated tooth decay.
- 53% are in need of physical therapy.
- 15% have low bone density
- 22% fail hearing tests.
- 55% have at least one kind of skin or nail condition.

Healthy Athletes has had an enormous impact on the health and well-being of Special Olympics athletes around the world, in some cases saving their lives by discovering unknown health issues or providing health care that otherwise would not be available.

Contact

Karl Hejlik, Sr. Manager, Health and Research Communications
Phone: +1 202-824-0308 or khejlik@specialolympics.org