**FUTURISTIC TRENDS IN ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES OF FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD**

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**ABSTRACT-**

This abstract provides an overview of recent advancements in assessment techniques of female athlete triad. Female participation in sports is on the rise worldwide, yielding positive health benefits. However, it has also led to specific health issues. The female athlete triad, identified in 1992 by the American College of Sports Medicine, encompasses disordered eating, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis. Inadequate energy intake, resulting from restricted diet or high expenditure, contributes to menstrual and bone density problems. Athletes in sports emphasizing leanness or low weight are particularly susceptible. Timely detection and prevention are vital for addressing triad disorders. Treatment involves restoring energy intake to appropriate levels (30 kcal.kg-1.d-1) to normalize metabolism. Those involved in female athletics must prioritize educating, recognizing, and treating at-risk athletes. On-going research about the triad disorders aids in crafting prevention and treatment approaches, enabling women to benefit from exercise throughout their lives. This review aims to examine the latest assessment tools for the triad and evaluate the effectiveness of physiotherapeutic interventions.

**INTRODUCTION**

When the American College of Sport Medicine (ACSM) first described the condition, known as Female Athlete Triad, in a consensus meeting called The Task Force on Women's Issues in 1992, it was made better known. The association among female athletes' disordered eating (DE), amenorrhea, and osteoporosis was the main topic of discussion at this conference. Low energy availability (i.e., burning more calories than one consumes), menstruation dysfunction, and low bone mineral density are the three symptoms that make up the female athlete triad.[1]

Athletes can experience the symptoms of or be diagnosed with the Triad without having all three components present at the same time. In fact, the appearance of even one component is sufficient to warrant additional testing in order to make a definitive diagnosis. The relationship between insufficient energy intake (with or without eating disorders), irregular menstrual function, and decreased bone mineral density is referred to as the Female Athlete Triad.

The female athlete triad is more prevalent among high school, college, and elite athletes, as well as in sports that involve subjective judging (like gymnastics and figure skating) or endurance activities emphasizing low body weight, such as running. According to a study by Gibbs et al., the occurrence of any individual triad component among physically active females and female athletes varied from 16.0% to 60.0%. The prevalence of any two of these conditions ranged from 2.7% to 27.0%, while the presence of all three symptoms ranged from 0% to 15.9%. Sports that prioritize weight, particularly those focused on achieving leanness or aesthetics, those where lower weight confers a competitive advantage, or those necessitating specific weight classes for participation, could result in chronic energy insufficiency due to restricted dietary intake, excessive exercise or both.

**ETIOLOGY OF THE TRIAD**

Commonly theorized is that the progression of the triad typically unfolds in a predictable manner. The female athlete begins restricting her diet with the belief that achieving a lower weight will enhance her performance. The athlete's diet becomes more restrictive for a variety of reasons, and her eating behaviour becomes unhealthy. The consequent energy limitation and harmful weight management practices make her more susceptible to menstrual irregularities and subsequently reduced bone mineral density (BMD). In accordance with this proposed sequence of events, the triad conditions are interconnected, meaning that the presence of any one disorder is directly or indirectly associated with the others.



Figure: Female athlete triad

**HEALTH CONSEQUENCES**

IMPACT OF FAT ON QUALITY OF LIFE

Numerous health implications arise in athletes experiencing the triad. Menstrual irregularities can result in infertility due to inadequate development of ovarian follicles, anovulation, or luteal-phase abnormalities. Conversely, during recovery from the triad, some young women might experience premature ovulation leading to unexpected pregnancies in the absence of contraception, while their menstruation is being re-established. Hypoestrogenism also yields adverse effects. Insufficient estrogen levels can trigger endothelial dysfunction, culminating in cardiovascular ailments. Women with low estrogen levels exhibit elevated levels of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol. The risk of injury is heightened by irregular menstrual cycles. Athletes with amenorrhea face 2 to 4 times greater vulnerability to stress fractures compared to those with regular menstruation. Additionally, reduced bone density exposes these women to suboptimal attainment of peak bone mass, increasing the risk of future complications. While the immediate effects might not manifest upon triad diagnosis, a decline in peak skeletal bone mineral density (BMD) and gradual skeletal demineralization can lead to these conditions over time. Similarly, the resumption of menstrual cycles doesn't immediately rectify BMD issues, but rather initiates the essential process of bone rebuilding to mitigate future risks of osteoporosis and fractures. Depending on the patient's age, triad duration, and recovery time, BMD might stabilize or even improve, though it may not fully "catch up" to normal, age-appropriate levels. The impact of reduced energy intake on athletic performance differs based on the extent and length of the energy deficiency, alongside the physical requirements of the sport. Prolonged periods of constrained energy intake have a more pronounced detrimental influence on performance. Similarly, athletes engaged in endurance disciplines with substantial energy requirements (such as distance running, swimming, cycling, and basketball) exhibit greater performance repercussions compared to those participating in sports with lower energy demands (like gymnastics, diving, and weightlifting).

**RISK FACTORS**

The main factor contributing to the development of the Female Athlete Triad is inadequate energy availability (EA). Athletes can intentionally or unintentionally modify two aspects of EA: their daily dietary energy intake or their daily exercise energy expenditure. Any factor that leads to a reduction in daily dietary energy intake has the potential to become a risk element for developing low energy availability. Several factors influence dietary intake, including disordered eating behaviours, energy deficit behaviours, food allergies or intolerances, personal beliefs, external pressures from coaches, family, or peers, diminished self-esteem, biological and genetic factors, and the influence of social media platforms in today's context. Persistent inadequate energy intake prompts the reconfiguration of organ systems, aiming to conserve energy for critical physiological functions. Female Athlete Triad can manifest in any sport, irrespective of the athlete's skill level or age. However, it is more prevalent in sports that prioritize aesthetics and involve subjective evaluation, those demanding athletes to fit specific weight categories, or sports where lower body weight confers a competitive edge. For instance, activities like dancing, diving, gymnastics, and ice skating fall within the category of sports that prioritize leanness and are subjectively evaluated.

Wrestling, boxing, and rowing are categorized as weight class sports, where athletes compete in specific weight divisions. On the other hand, running, ski jumping, high jump, and cycling fall under the group of gravitational sports, where being lean provides a competitive edge. Sports characterized by substantial energy expenditure, like rowing and cycling, as well as those involving intensified training volume, have the potential to lead to low energy availability (LEA).

**Diagnostic tests for the female athlete triad**

1. **Low energy availability**
* Observable indications: body mass index less than 17.5 kg/m2 or
* body weight less than 85% of expected
* Calculation (with aid of daily food logs and accelerometer):
* Energy intake [kcal] – exercise energy expenditure /fat-free mass or lean body mass
* Measurement of resting metabolic rate
* Assessment of Tri-iodothyronine (T3) level

**Screening tools –**

* Athletic Milieu Direct Questionnaire (AMDQ)
* The Physiologic Screening Test (PST)
* Female Athlete Screening Tool (FAST)
* Brief Eating Disorders in Athletes Questionnaire (BEDA-Q)
1. **Reduced Bone Mineral Density**
* Dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) is recommended under the following circumstances :
* Oligomenorrhea or amenorrhea lasting 6 months or more
* Presence of Disordered eating or an eating disorder for a period of 6 months or more
* History of stress fracture or other fracture resulting from minimal trauma

**Interpretation:**

Reduced bone mineral density

* **Ages 5–19:** Z score equal to or less than –2.0
* **Age ≥ 20:** Z score ranging from –1.0 and –2.0 in combination with a history of factors like nutritional deficiency, hypoestrogenism, stress fracture, or other secondary risk factor fracture

**Osteoporosis**

* **Ages 5–19:** Z score equal to or less than –2.0 plus clinically significant fracture
* **Age ≥ 20:** Z score equal to or less than –2.0 plus secondary cause of osteoporosis
1. **Menstrual dysfunction**
* Exclude pregnancy and blockage of the outflow tract
* Oligomenorrhea: Gap of more than 35 days between menstrual cycles
* Amenorrhea: Absence of menstruation

**Laboratory tests to consider:**

* Follicle-stimulating hormone
* Prolactin
* Progesterone challenge
* Thyroid-stimulating hormone, thyroxine (T4)

**History and Examination**

**Uterine pathology and outflow tract disorder**

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FINDINGS

**Disorders of sexual differentiation**

Preliminary assessment (derived from patient history and examination)

* LH, FSH, hCG
* Prolactin
* TSH, free T4
* Estradiol, Testosterone (total and free), progesterone
* Progesterone challenge test
* Pelvic examination

**Exclude the possibility of pregnancy**

Abnormal TSH, Prolactin and progesterone

Increased gonadotropin

Negative progesterone challenge test

Normal gonadotropin Possibly increased FSH increased testosterone level and positive progesterone challenge test

Low to normal gonadotropins

Negative progesterone challenge test

Possibly increased prolactin

Hypothalamic pituitary etiology

Rule out outflow tract obstruction if not done so previously

Consider FHA

Primary ovarian insufficiency

Specific investigation of endocrine disorder

Chronic anovulation/ PCOS

**DIAGNOSIS**

TABLE 2: Amenorrhea algorithm FSH- follicle-stimulating hormone; HCG- human gonadotropin hormone ; PCOS, polycystic ovarian syndrome; TSH, thyroid-stimulating hormone

**MANAGEMENT OF TRIAD**

The treatment of Triad-related factors is intricate and influenced by various factors. Thus, a collaborative approach involving multiple disciplines is crucial. Each team member offers distinct insights and holds specific responsibilities within the team. Given that each athlete's requirements differ, not all healthcare professionals might be part of the athlete's care; usually, the primary care physician supervises the multidisciplinary team and determines the essential team members for the athlete's care. The importance of tailoring a personalized program for effective athlete care cannot be overstated. Studies have demonstrated significant variations in physical traits and physiological attributes among female athletes participating in the same sport, and even notable diversity within the same position within that sport.

**Non pharmacological Treatment**

Engaging in weight-bearing exercises stands as a key non-pharmacological method for enhancing and preserving bone mineral density (BMD) and structure throughout one's lifespan. Bone tissue is notably receptive to dynamic and forceful loading, impactful activities, and resistance training. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that lean body mass has emerged as a potent indicator of hip BMD among anorexic adolescents, as well as adolescent athletes and non-athletes.

**Pharmacological Treatment**

Physical activity and proper nutrition play vital roles in both treating and preventing the condition. Weight-bearing and dynamic exercises notably contribute to bone development and bone mineral density (BMD), particularly in premenopausal women. In certain instances, calcium and vitamin D supplements could be beneficial. For adults, the recommended daily intake is 1,000 mg of calcium and 600 to 800 IU of vitamin D.

**Replacement of Gonadal Steroids**

The primary gonadal hormones consist of estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone, all of which exhibit reduced levels in athletes experiencing amenorrhea.

**Estrogen replacement**

Due to the already low levels of IGF-1 in athletes with amenorrhea, the administration of oral estrogen could further decrease IGF-1 levels. This reduction limits the beneficial anti-resorptive effects of estrogen. Moreover, the type and dosage of oral estrogen have been implicated in the lack of effectiveness in increasing bone mineral density (BMD) in individuals with energy-deficient conditions.

Vaginal administration of estradiol bypasses the liver's initial metabolic processing, and a combination contraceptive ring containing vaginal estrogen and progesterone is now available. For young athletes aged 16 to 21 with functional hypothalamic amenorrhea (FHA), transdermal estradiol replacement coupled with cyclic progesterone may be considered to prevent further bone loss.

Antidepressants are commonly used for treating bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa after weight restoration, and for addressing concurrent depression and anxiety disorders.

Bisphosphonates, approved for postmenopausal osteoporosis, should not be used in young athletes with FHA due to two reasons. Firstly, their effectiveness hasn't been proven in women of childbearing age.

**Role of the Physical Therapist**

Among the team members, the physical therapist and exercise physiologist possess specialized knowledge in exercise metabolism, training responses, sports biomechanics, and creating exercise plans. Additionally, the physical therapist offers skills in evaluating and addressing athletic and orthopaedic injuries. These competencies render the physical therapist an essential component of the interdisciplinary team. The following outlines a partial set of goals when collaborating with this demographic.

The physical therapist and exercise physiologist bring expertise in a range of areas, including:

* Examining, evaluating, and treating athletic and orthopaedic injuries
* Assessing physical strength and conditioning
* Conducting biomechanical analyses
* Evaluating training programs and making necessary adjustments
* Implementing injury prevention strategies
* Collaborating with other sports professionals as required (such as strength and conditioning specialists or speed trainers)
* Conducting body composition assessments (if appropriately trained)
* Educating athletes on rest-recovery ratios and cross-training practices.

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss specific intervention plans; however, some key considerations are provided. Physical therapy practice guidelines designed for addressing osteoporosis and skeletal demineralization disorders offer an initial framework for intervention. Nevertheless, individuals with the triad exhibit a higher level of complexity than what these individual guidelines might indicate.

**Weight-Bearing Exercise and the Triad**

Recent research has shown that engaging in higher load plyometric jump training can promote bone formation and elevate bone mineral density (BMD) in adolescent girls. This implies that integrating plyometric training could aid girls in reaching their maximum BMD levels. To stimulate and sustain training adaptations, as well as skeletal muscle growth and increased BMD, it's crucial to include weight-bearing activities and trunk-strengthening exercises at an appropriate intensity. Resistance training contributes to enhancing fat-free mass and also plays a role in fostering bone development in premenopausal women. Importantly, any approach aiming to enhance bone mineral density (BMD) must encompass both these aspects. Athletic trainers and physical therapists are pivotal in educating female athletes with Triad-related conditions about interventions that can enhance their BMD. When resistance training and weight-bearing activities become permissible, the athletic trainer or physical therapist will develop an exercise regimen that incorporates the right balance of impact and resistance training. This program will also align with the athlete's sport-specific objectives.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the limited level of supporting evidence, the contribution of physiotherapy to the treatment and handling of the Female Athlete Triad is evident. Physiotherapists are involved in preseason assessments and evaluations, evaluating movement and strength, injury prevention, and injury rehabilitation. They offer their expertise in biomechanical analysis of fundamental movements and educate athletes, coaches, parents, other team members, and the general public about the Female Athlete Triad, its constituents, and potential implications for health and performance.

When needed, physiotherapists refer their patients to other specialists for additional counselling or diagnosis.Top of Form Physiotherapists are a part of a multidisciplinary team which represents a unified front. All team members of the teamwork in unison to provide best possible care for the athletes.

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