Identifying Sudden Cardiac Issues in Young Athletes

By Amy Bentley

SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST

“Sudden cardiac arrest is a condition in which the heart suddenly stops beating. If this happens, the blood pumped from the heart stops flowing to the brain and other vital organs. If it’s not treated in minutes, it leads to death,” says Dr. Batra, medical director of electrophysiology at CHOC Children’s and the division chief of pediatric cardiology at UC Irvine. Sudden cardiac arrest is usually caused by an irregular heartbeat, or a condition called arrhythmia. Depending on the type of arrhythmia, says Dr. Batra, it may or may not be life-threatening. Sudden cardiac arrest is not the same as a heart attack, in which blood flowing to a part of the heart muscle is blocked. In a heart attack, the heart usually doesn’t stop beating.

HEART RISK SYMPTOMS FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

“Young athletes that suffer sudden cardiac arrest usually have an inherited condition that tends to run in families. Often it is not previously diagnosed,” says Dr. Batra. A child’s family should seek medical help sooner rather than later if the child experiences a fast or irregular heartbeat, passes out or has chest pains, especially when active or exercising. Young athletes with a family history of cardiac problems also should be screened for possible heart problems, he says.

SURVIVING SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST: WHAT TO DO

If someone you are with shows signs of a sudden cardiac arrest (chest pain; discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck or jaw; or an unexplained shortness of breath), call 911 or ask someone else to call. Start CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) immediately if the person is unconscious and not breathing. CPR will keep the blood circulating to the brain and other organs. Meanwhile, ask someone else to look for an automated external defibrillator (AED) and use it immediately. An AED is a portable device that sends an electric shock through the chest to the heart. The shock can restore a normal rhythm to the heart. AEDs are often kept in public places like schools and anyone can use one. “Every second matters. That’s the difference between life and death,” Dr. Batra says. In Orange County, about three-fourths of the public schools have an AED or are implementing an AED program, Dr. Batra says.

Bringing Hope

The CHOC Children’s Heart Institute brings hope to children with heart disease, and their families, by providing state-of-the-art diagnosis and treatment for an entire spectrum of heart conditions in newborns to adolescents. We are the only pediatric dedicated facility in Southern California offering the latest in advanced cardiovascular care, and the only regional facility to perform neonatal and pediatric open heart surgery.

Learn more at choc.org/heart

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NUMBER OF SUDDEN CARDIAC DEATHS IN ORANGE COUNTY AMONG YOUNG ATHLETES, PER YEAR

1,000-9,500
NUMBER OF YOUTHS WHO EXPERIENCE SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST ANNUALLY (ESTIMATES VARY WIDELY)

424,000
NUMBER OF PEOPLE OF ALL AGES IN THE U.S. WHO EXPERIENCE NON-TRAUMATIC SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST ANNUALLY; 9 TO 10 VICTIMS FROM THIS GROUP DIE