

The Power of Coaching: Strategies to address Substance Abuse with Student Athletes

Coaches and athletes spend many hours together on the field and are often seen as strong role models for impressionable teens. This gives coaches more consistent opportunities to educate their players on the risks associated with misusing and abusing drugs and alcohol. Outlined below are strategies coaches can use to help keep their players safe.

1. **Pay attention to the signs.** Talk to athletes who show signs of drug abuse or who you suspect are engaged in other high-risk behaviors. If you suspect something isn't quite right with one of your athletes, pull him or her aside to find out what might be going on in their life. Ask questions like "What's going on today?" or "How come you seem so distracted?" The signs and symptoms of prescription medicine abuse depend on the particular drug being used. Because of their mind-altering properties, the most commonly abused prescription drugs are: opioid painkillers, anti-anxiety medications/sedatives, and stimulants. Below are some of the symptoms to look for if you believe an athlete is abusing drugs.

Pain Reliever Abuse (Opioid painkillers- used to treat pain)	Depressant Abuse (Anti-anxiety medication and sedatives)	Stimulant Abuse (Used to treat ADHD and certain sleep disorders)
Depression Low blood pressure Decreased breathing rate Confusion Sweating Constricted pupils	Drowsiness Confusion Poor judgment Dizziness Slurred speech Respiratory depression	Weight loss, Agitation, Irritability, Insomnia, High blood pressure, Irregular heartbeat, Anxiety, Impulsive behavior

2. **Add prescription drug abuse to the code of conduct.** Make sure that prescription drug abuse is included (along with alcohol, steroids and illicit substances) as part of the written or verbal code of conduct you have with athletes and hold kids accountable. It's important to follow through in disciplining any breaks in conduct, even with "star" players.
3. **Listen up and intervene if needed.** Coaches are often the ones who overhear conversations about the weekend's activities. Teens often speak more freely in front of coaches than parents. If you overhear athletes talking about drugs or alcohol, speak up. Do not be afraid of telling an athlete that they won't be able to play if they use any illicit substances. Be sure to report this to the guidance department or administration and find out how best to handle the situation.
4. **Take action locally.** Stay current about the drug abuse problem, as well as any local efforts to promote drug-free, safe schools. The Montgomery County Prevention Coalition is working on these issues in the county and can help support your efforts. If you are interested in learning more or attending a meeting, please contact Tristyn Eppley at TEppley@phdmc.org or 937-496-6959.