

## **Identifying a RED-S Flag: A Letter to Coaches from a Sports Dietitian**



As a coach, you have a unique and valuable relationship with your athletes. You play the role of teacher, mentor, and guardian. The bond you share is built upon respect and trust. Your athletes respect you because they trust that you know what's best for them ... and what's best for them goes beyond the court, track, field, stage, pool, or mat.

This article covers what you need to know about RED-S to help take care of your team and improve their athletic potential.

### **Have you heard of RED-S?**

RED-S, or *Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport*, is defined by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as impaired physiological functioning caused by relative energy deficiency. In other words, when your athlete's diet isn't enough to support their training needs, the body looks for other ways to conserve energy (which can hurt health and performance).

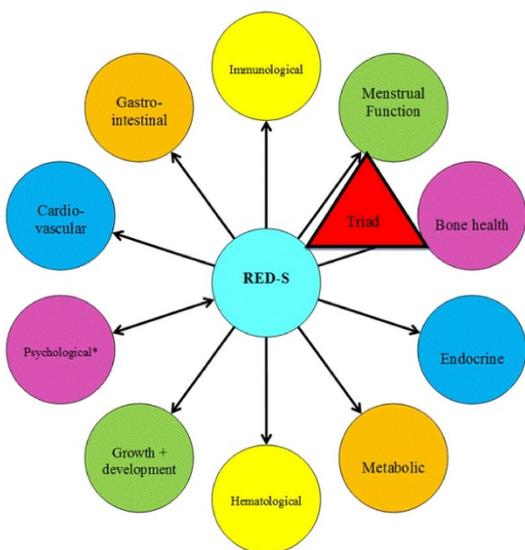
This condition, which was once referred to as the Female Athlete Triad (low energy, low bone density, and irregular menstruation), has gained a lot of attention and research over the last 20 years. In 2014, the IOC released a consensus [statement](#) providing guidelines on RED-S, and has since [updated](#) it in 2018.

As a coach, it's important that you know what RED-S is and what you can do to address it to keep your athletes safe and healthy.

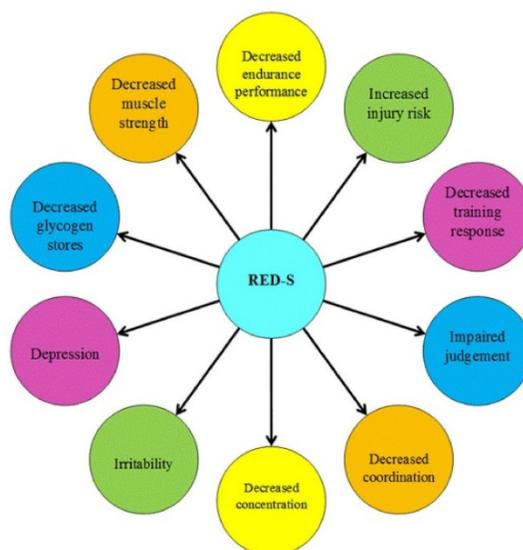


### Here's what you need to know

1. **RED-S is common.** RED-S affects both male and female athletes. While it occurs across all sports, weight-sensitive sports may have a greater risk. These sports include cross-country, cycling, ski team, dance, gymnastics, rowing, swimming, and wrestling.
2. **RED-S has consequences.** RED-S can lead to short-term and long-term negative effects on the athlete. Health concerns include impairing bone density, reproductive health, the immune system, hormone activity, cardiovascular function, hydration, and mental health. Performance concerns include stress fractures, poor recovery, low energy, illness, decreased muscle mass, cramping, and decreased attention.



Potential Health Consequences of RED-S (IOC)



Potential Performance Consequences of RED-S (IOC)

3. **RED-S is treatable.** With appropriate attention and care, athletes can restore their energy and health, and reduce the risk of long-term effects. As a coach, you play an important role in this.

## Here's what you can do

1. **Help prevent RED-S.** Foster a climate that reduces the emphasis on weight or appearance. Avoid commenting (positively or negatively) on athlete size or shape. Encourage pre- and post-training snacks. Coordinate with your athletic trainer or a local health professional to give an educational talk or workshop on RED-S with your athletes.
2. **Identify “RED-S” flags.** Identifying athletes at risk can prevent the development or worsening of RED-S. Keep an eye out for athletes with weight loss, restrictive eating, excessive exercise (outside training regimen), recurrent injuries and illness, decreased performance, and changes in mood.
3. **Respect treatment plans.** Treatment and evaluation of RED-S conditions should be done by a health professional or team. Depending on the athlete's risk level, this may affect participation in competition or training. Your compliance and support of the prescribed treatment will set the tone of how serious RED-S is to your team. The use of athlete contracts is an effective method for ensuring athletes follow treatment plans while still participating in training.



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