

# Heart Screening Prevents Sudden Deaths in Athletes

By Ed Edelson

*HealthDay Reporter*

TUESDAY, Oct. 3 (HealthDay News) -- A screening program that spots hidden heart trouble can cut the rate of sudden death in athletes, an Italian study shows.

By 2004, the rate of sudden cardiac deaths in the Veneto section of Italy dropped by 89 percent -- from 3.6 to 0.4 per 100,000 person/years -- after the screening program was started in 1979, concludes a new report published in the Oct. 4 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"All these findings suggest that screening athletes for cardiomyopathies is a lifesaving strategy," the report said. Cardiomyopathies are abnormalities of heart muscle which can cause sudden death.

The screening program also led to 2 percent of the athletes being disqualified for competition for medical reasons, noted the team of cardiologist researchers at the University of Padua Medical School.

"The issue of sudden death in young people has been receiving consistent attention from the medical community for many years, and that has intensified in the last two or three years," said Dr. John P. Payne, director of cardiac electrophysiology at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

He estimated that anywhere from 200 to 400 young athletes die on the playing field of cardiac arrest in the United States each year but, right now, "we don't have accurate public health measures."

The American Heart Association recommends screening for high school and college athletes before they compete, including a physical examination plus a family history. Family history is important, experts say, because many cardiomyopathies are inherited.

European authorities also recommend that would-be athletes undergo electrocardiogram (ECG). In fact, the Italian report attributes much of the success of their program to regular screening via ECGs.

However, American sports organizations such as the National Athletic Trainers Association -- which recently issued screening guidelines -- have not called for ECG screening, on the grounds that many young people are wrongfully identified as having problems on the basis of an ECG.

Payne disagreed with that assessment. He said that every young athlete should be "thoroughly screened [for heart problems] by a trained health-care provider. I think it should be done by a personal physician, with an ECG."

Detecting abnormalities can save lives, he said, and also help young people identify and treat potential problems early.

And yet, "I think it is fair to say that the United States lags behind other countries in terms of bringing the issue to the attention of the public at large, as well as to school administrators," Payne said.

More information

Find out more on sudden cardiac death at the American Heart Association.