

Project TOLFREY

Nutritional supplement habits and perceptions of athletes with a disability

Very few studies have investigated the nutritional knowledge and supplement use of athletes with a disability. To our knowledge no studies have looked beyond the descriptive use of supplements at the perceptions of disabled athletes and the sources of information they use when deciding whether to consume a supplement or not. With the popularity of disability sport from grassroots up to elite level on the rise, further understanding of the dietary practices and supplement use of athletes at all levels is warranted. This is especially so as the specific needs of each disability can mean there is a greater prevalence of supplement use in disability sport. Research is also urgently needed as the current recommendations (type, frequency and dosage) for supplement use in disability sport are based upon data from able-bodied (AB) athletes and cannot be directly transferred to athletes with a disability.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has discouraged the use of dietary supplements by athletes whilst encouraging them to meet their nutrient needs from food. They do however recognise that a few ergogenic aids may be of benefit to some individuals. The practical implications of disabilities such as visual impairment or cerebral palsy can make it difficult to prepare nutritious meals. Therefore, issues related to meeting nutrient needs solely from whole foods might lead to some individuals relying on supplements to do this. Given the lack of information regarding supplement habits and perceptions in elite disabled sportsmen and women it is hard to deliver the same discouraging message to this population. It is thus essential that nutritional supplement habits and perceptions of athletes with a disability are considered when the IPC/WADA delivers any message regarding supplement use. The current study will help provide this information and answer a number of vital questions regarding supplements and the disabled athlete.

The objectives of this study are to determine: (1) the prevalence and type of dietary supplements used by athletes; (2) the frequency and dosage of use, and the reasons for their use; (3) where athletes obtain their information regarding supplements; (4) if gender, age, sporting event, disability class, sporting experience and nationality of the athlete influence supplement use; (5) how athletes perceive supplement use; and (6) the attitudes of disabled athletes towards doping in sport.

The study will employ an anonymous questionnaire which will be available online (The London 2012 Paralympic Games Research webpage and www.thepeterharrisoncentre.org.uk) for development and elite athletes to complete. The questionnaire will also be made available on a number of laptops at domestic UK competitions for athletes to complete on site. Questionnaires will also be made accessible to visually impaired athletes through audio readers or alternative methods by request.