

 **ASK THE EXPERTS** 



**Dr. Casey Cooper** is a sports psychologist in Mission Viejo.  
[www.drcaseycooper.com](http://www.drcaseycooper.com).



**Lori Breeden-Gomez** is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with a private practice in Brea.  
[www.TherapistFinder.com](http://www.TherapistFinder.com).



**Jill Rigby** is a columnist. Her third book, "Raising Unselfish Children in a Self-Absorbed World" hits bookstores on April 1.



**Dr. Steve Chen** is Medical Director for Valens Medical, a weight loss and nutrition clinic in Irvine, CA.  
[www.valensmd.com](http://www.valensmd.com).

## LITTLE ATHLETE

My 10-year-old daughter is passionate about gymnastics. She has been training since she was six and tells me everyday that she's going to the Olympics. I'm pleased with her focus and discipline, but I also don't want her to suffer from injuries, over-training, or even an eating disorder. What's the best way to guide her?



You are absolutely on target to monitor your daughter for over-training. Recently, I have seen an increase in referrals due to concerns with weight management and diet. It may

come as a surprise to parents that food restriction and injuries are often related, and result from a combination of factors known as the Female Athlete Triad.

The Female Athlete Triad can cause both short and long-term problems to the developing body of a young athlete. It often begins with a desire to become as “fit” or lean as possible. Athletes sometimes believe that the less they weigh, the stronger, faster, or more powerful their performances will be. Unfortunately, the opposite is more often true. The results are often a decrease in performance and an increase in depression and anxiety. Here are the conditions of the Female Athlete Triad:

- 1. Disordered Eating:** Restriction of food intake or purging of food to lose weight. Athletes will often consume far less calories than their developing bodies need to support the exercise they are participating in.
- 2. Amenorrhea:** The absence of menstrual cycles for longer than six months is caused by having a very low percentage of body fat, leading to a drop in estrogen.
- 3. Osteoporosis:** Critical bone development and building of bone mass/density occurs during a woman’s teenage years. When a young athlete restricts her food intake, her bones are weakened and the risk of injury is high.

Here are some warning signs that your athlete may be in danger: weight loss, irregular periods or a delay in menstruation, fainting or chronic fatigue, stress fractures and a preoccupation with food.

What should you do if you are concerned that your child may be suffering from the Female Athlete Triad? Schedule a visit with a physician. Your doctor will help you and your daughter determine what is contributing to her symptoms and if she is safe to continue athletic training and at what intensity level. Also, a Sports Psychologist is trained to work collectively with your doctor, family, coaches, dietician, trainers, and most importantly, your child athlete during talk therapy treatment. The goal is to establish and maintain a healthy weight that can support the physical demands of sports training and competition. With proper treatment, sports participation should continue to be a positive, healthy, and fulfilling activity for your family.

—*Dr. Casey Cooper*