

SPRING Forward: Balanced Eating, Exercise, and Body Image in Sport for Female Athletes

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Female athletes are at increased risk for relative energy deficiencies, eating disorders, and poor body image satisfaction in comparison to their non-athlete peers. SPRING Forward is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit committed to empowering adolescent female athletes in Colorado by transforming the culture and narrative surrounding eating, exercise, and body image in sport. Through education, community engagement, and access to evidence-based resources, we aim to promote long-term athlete health, performance, and well-being. By addressing the unique challenges female athletes face—including limited access to specialized care and persistent misconceptions about nutrition and training—we aim to foster a supportive environment that prioritizes health over harmful performance pressures ensuring athletes thrive both on and off the field.

To date, many organized educational programs discussing the aforementioned concerns have focused on collegiate athletes. For example, the Female Athlete Body Project held with collegiate athletes showed a decrease in both symptoms and risk factors of eating disorders^[i, ii]. While these programs have had significant success at the collegiate level, athletes at the adolescent level face similar concerns^[iii, iv]. In fact, recent studies suggest adolescent athletes are at increased risk for long term sequelae of malnutrition in sport compared to adult athletes given the additional energy demands for growth and development required during this time^[v].

SPRING Forward aims to combat these concerns within the adolescent age group by providing an organized 2-hour educational curriculum with the goal of preventing disordered eating, exercise, and body image within adolescent sport rather than simply intervening at the collegiate level. The initial SPRING Forward program was offered to female cross country, cheer, swimming and diving athletes at a local high school in 2021. A pre-post study of these sessions was performed which showed a statistically significant increase in body image flexibility following completion of the program^[vi]. In 2023, the *SPRING Forward: Balanced Eating, Exercise, and Body Image in Sport for Female Athletes* book was published which includes the program manual, associated handouts, and relevant background information (e.g. basics of sports nutrition, disordered eating in athletes, relative energy deficiency in sport) with the intention of disseminating the SPRING Forward educational curriculum while also ensuring session leaders are educated and knowledgeable on covered content^[vii]. In addition, SPRING Forward has active social media platforms and a growing website with access to online, free educational resources.

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