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Over-the-counter drug use amongst athletes and non-athletes.

Chester N, Reilly T, Mottram DR.

School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.

AIM:

Many over-the-counter (OTC) drugs used in the symptomatic relief of upper respiratory tract (URT) conditions are banned by sports governing bodies. It would appear therefore that athletes are being penalised for practising conventional pharmacological methods in the management of common ailments. The aim was to identify any differences between athletes and non-athletes and amongst athletic groups, with respect to the prevalence of URT conditions and the use of OTC drugs to treat such conditions.

METHODS:

Questionnaires were distributed at domestic and international athletics meetings and at university lectures and tutorials. Respondents (n=401) represented both track and field athletes (n=199) and non-athletes (n=202).

RESULTS:

No differences were found between athletes and non-athletes and between elite and non-elite athletes in terms of the frequency of episodes of URT conditions reported in the previous year. A higher proportion of elite, as opposed to non-elite athletes did not take OTC medicines (p=0.028) and of those that did take OTC medicines a higher proportion of elite athletes (68%) as opposed to non-elite (32%) took those not containing sympathomimetics, banned by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Athletes were found to have greater knowledge of IOC banned OTC drugs (p=0.002) and within this group, elite athletes were most knowledgeable (p=0.0003). Although most respondents (81%) believed that OTC drugs should not be prohibited in sport, athletes made up the greatest proportion in support of prohibition (23.5% as opposed to 14.4% of non-athletes) with elite as opposed to non-elite most in favour (p=0.0181).

CONCLUSION:

These results suggest that URT conditions are no more prevalent between athletes and non-athletes or between endurance and power athletes. Athletes competing at the highest level tended to avoid OTC medicines or those containing IOC banned drugs and were most knowledgeable in terms of banned OTC drugs and most in favour of their prohibition suggesting that the control mechanisms in place are only reaching elite athletes.

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