

SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST IN TEENS & YOUNG ADULTS

WHAT EVERY FAMILY SHOULD KNOW

When we think of sudden cardiac arrest (SCA), we often picture older adults or individuals living with chronic conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, or high cholesterol. What rarely comes to mind are teens and young adults.

Yet sudden cardiac arrest can—and does—affect young people between the ages of 12 and 35. While they make up a smaller portion of overall cases, an estimated 15,000 to 23,000 children under the age of 17 experience cardiac arrest each year. Of those, 8–13% do not survive. Not every cardiac arrest can be prevented. But many deaths can be. With immediate CPR and access to an AED, up to 90% of sudden cardiac arrest deaths are survivable.

WHY AWARENESS MATTERS

Because teens and young adults account for a smaller percentage of sudden cardiac arrest cases, they are often not routinely screened for underlying heart conditions that increase risk. According to Parent Heart Watch, 1 in 300 youth has an undetected cardiac condition that could place them at risk for sudden cardiac arrest. Many of these conditions produce few—if any—early warning signs.

Common cardiac-related risk factors include:

- Cardiomyopathies
 - Chronic conditions that affect the heart muscle and impair its ability to pump effectively. These may stem from genetic mutations, viral infections, medications, or autoimmune disorders.
- Arrhythmias
 - Abnormal heart rhythms that cause the heart to beat too fast, too slow, or irregularly.
- Long QT Syndrome
 - A specific electrical disorder where the heart takes longer to “reset” between beats, increasing the risk of fast and chaotic rhythms.

ATHLETICS AND THE RISK OF SUDDEN CARDIAC ARREST

Young athletes represent one of the highest-risk groups for sudden cardiac arrest. Athletic activity places increased demands on the cardiovascular system—higher heart rates, greater oxygen needs, and physical exertion in extreme conditions such as heat. For athletes with undiagnosed heart conditions, this added stress can trigger a cardiac event.

The majority of cardiac arrests in young athletes are linked to genetic or hereditary heart conditions that often go unnoticed due to limited screening. While early detection cannot prevent every event, it can help identify risk and guide safer participation.

WARNING SIGNS OF UNDERLYING CARDIAC CONDITIONS

Some teens and young adults experience symptoms before a cardiac event. These warning signs should never be ignored, especially when they occur during or after physical activity:

- Fainting or near-fainting
- Seizures during or after exercise
- Chest pain with physical exertion
- Racing or irregular heartbeats at rest
- Unusual shortness of breath
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Extreme or unexplained fatigue
- Family history of sudden cardiac arrest in youth
- Unexplained death during or shortly after exercise in a family member