

The health risks of doping

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Olympians are often considered the best athletes in the world, but with that comes the pressure to perform. As a result, some Olympic athletes may turn to doping. Baylor College of Medicine's Dr. Thomas Kosten examines the effects of doping and discusses why doping is an important issue to address.

"Doping is using any banned substances, which are thought to be a performance enhancer at the time of the athletic competition or during the season when training," said Kosten, professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and director of the division of alcohol and addiction psychiatry at Baylor.

The simple reason that athletes start doping is because they want to win, and these substances can help in a variety of ways, he said.

"Some substances increase an athlete's ability to build up their muscles so they can be stronger. Some athletes dope because they want to improve their endurance or enhance their pain tolerance so they can push through an injury," Kosten said.

Although most substances that are involved in doping are not addictive, Kosten warns they can cause complications down the road.

"With most doping substances there isn't a major withdrawal syndrome or an inability to stop taking them because the athlete is psychologically addicted to them," Kosten said. "More typically, the complications of these substances are long-term health problems such as liver cancers.

Other organs can also be damaged by heavy doping over long periods of time. Life-threatening complications can come up months or years later."

According to Kosten, the temptation to dope is more prevalent among younger athletes because younger athletes are more prone to risk taking. He adds that doping while training for or competing at the Olympics can impact an athlete throughout their career including ruining their future careers.

"If athletes who doped while competing in the Olympics go on to continue in professional sports careers where those peak levels of performance continue to be demanded of them, then they will likely continue to use substances because that's what they need to do in order to perform," Kosten said.

He also notes that adolescents can be negatively influenced when they see that their favorite athlete has been caught doping.

"There are some young people who see their favorite athlete as this huge muscle man and they ask, how did he get that way?" Kosten said. "The more that kids see successful [athletes](#) caught doping, even if the outcome is the loss of their medals or other legal ramifications, the more those adolescents are not as fearful of the consequences but are impressed by how well the athlete performed."

At the end of the day, Kosten cautions that [doping](#) is not worth doing.

"There are many more things that matter than one competition, even if your goal is to become an Olympic gold medalist," Kosten said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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