

Anti-doping education: Teaching athletes about morality in sport can help reduce doping

December 2 2020



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Elite athletes can be persuaded not to take banned substances—either by appealing to their sense of morality or educating them about the risks of

using performance-enhancing drugs, according to a new study.

Researchers developed two separate [intervention](#) programmes—one targeting moral factors associated with [doping](#) likelihood, the other introducing doping and providing information about the [health consequences](#) of banned [substances](#) and the risks of sport supplements.

They tested both programmes on young [elite athletes](#) from the UK and Greece, finding that both approaches were equally effective at deterring the sportspeople from taking banned substances over a six-month period.

Led by sports science experts at the University of Birmingham and funded by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), the international research group's findings are published today in *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*.

Dr. Maria Kavussanu, from the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Birmingham, commented: "We must take action to reduce doping in sport -evidence suggests that banned substances are being used at alarming levels, particularly among elite athletes, where over 50% of competitors may be using these drugs based on some estimates.

"Our research group is the first to develop and evaluate an intervention focussing on moral variables and compare it with an educational intervention of equal duration. Both programmes were effective in reducing doping likelihood in two countries—effects which were sustained six months after the interventions finished."

The moral intervention targeted three variables known to be associated with doping likelihood: moral identity—focussing on honesty and fairness; moral disengagement—how individuals absolve themselves of responsibility; and moral atmosphere—whether doping was likely to be

condoned or condemned by teammates.

Researchers formulated the educational intervention to introduce the doping control process and discuss healthy nutrition, whilst providing information about the consequences of taking banned substances and sport supplements. Whistle-blowing was also covered.

"Our findings suggest that alongside their typical content such as providing information about the harms of banned substances, anti-doping education programs should consider targeting moral variables," added Dr. Kavussanu.

"That the two interventions produced sustained changes across the UK and Greece suggests that they contained highly effective elements that cut across cultures and are relevant to athletes from different countries."

The 'moral' programme saw [young athletes](#) comparing different approaches to success—winning at-all-costs versus being the best-you-can-be. They learned about the importance of honesty and fair play in sport and how doping undermines this.

Participants reflected on justifications athletes use for doping and the consequences of doping for others—stories of athletes awarded medals retrospectively such as Kelly Sotherton, Adam Nelson and Valerie Adams.

The 'educational' programme introduced participants to WADA and its role in regulating doping in sport, setting out the doping control process and introducing banned substances and the consequences they can have on athletes' health.

Risks associated with common types of banned performance-enhancing substances such as anabolic steroids, stimulants and erythropoietin were

explained. Athletes also learned about risks associated with sport supplements such as protein, energy drinks and creatine.

They also discussed the role of nutrition and its benefits for performance and recovery—examining their own nutrition using the MyFitnessPal app and identifying the areas of their diet that could be improved.

More information: A Moral Intervention reduces doping likelihood in UK and Greek athletes: Evidence from a Cluster Randomized Control Trial, *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, [DOI: 10.1123/JSEP.2019-0313](https://doi.org/10.1123/JSEP.2019-0313)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Anti-doping education: Teaching athletes about morality in sport can help reduce doping (2020, December 2) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-anti-doping-athletes-morality-sport-doping.html>

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