Sickle Cell Position Statement

About Sickle Cell Trait

Sickle Cell trait is a rare condition that affects the type of hemoglobin found within the red blood cell. Hemoglobin is responsible for carrying oxygen within the red blood cell. During normal daily activities, those affected by sickle cell trait show no symptoms and have no adverse health issues related to the abnormal hemoglobin. However, when stressed physically under extreme conditions (extreme heat, high level exertion in the presence of an active illness, exertion at altitude, or exertion at intensity levels greater than normally experienced by the student-athlete), the individual may begin to manifest symptoms of the disorder. Symptoms can include severe muscle cramps, dizziness, nausea, and extreme shortness of breath. If not recognized and treated relatively early, it may progress to multi organ damage and possibly sudden death. Although rare, sudden death among athletes has occurred and been linked to carrying the trait. For a variety of reasons, the condition seems to affect those aged 18-24 years of age at greater degrees than younger individuals. Although sickle cell trait is most prominent in African-Americans, and those of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Indian, Caribbean, and South and Central American ancestry, persons of all races and ancestry may test positive for sickle cell trait.

Policy

The NCAA is mandating that starting with the 2012-13 academic year, all Division II student-athletes must be tested for sickle cell trait, show proof of a prior test or sign a waiver releasing the University of liability, if they decline to be tested. In accordance with this legislation the Kutztown University Sports Medicine Department is mandating that all student-athletes must be tested for sickle cell trait, show proof of a prior test or sign a waiver releasing the State of Pennsylvania, the University, its officers, employees and agents from any and all costs, liability, expense claims, demands or causes of action on account of any loss or personal injury that might result from non-compliance with the mandate of the NCAA and Kutztown University.

If identified as carrying the abnormal hemoglobin, you can continue to participate in your respective sport without significant restrictions. Care would be taken and restrictions imposed only if you had an active febrile infection or one that affected your respiratory system, if you were training at altitude, or in extreme weather conditions (especially heat). Ensuring adequate hydration during practice and competition, and training at reasonable exertion levels is another important factor in preventing adverse health issues.

In Pennsylvania, infants born after 1992 were most likely tested for the sickle cell trait and therefore the documentation could be available from your family pediatrician. The screening test can also be performed with your family physician. If the initial screening test does come back positive for sickle cell, a follow up test can be performed to determine if you have Sickle Cell Disease vs. Sickle Cell Trait. Educational sessions around the topic of sickle cell and the precautions that need to be undertaken due to the serious nature of the condition will be required for all those individuals who are sickle cell trait positive.

It is with your health and safety in mind that we take this position that all student-athletes know their sickle cell trait status. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns regarding this issue.