

Participation by Individuals with Down Syndrome Who Have Atlanto-axial Instability

In light of medical research indicating that up to 15% of individuals with Down syndrome have a mal-alignment of the cervical vertebrae C-1 and C-2 in the neck known as Atlanto-axial instability, exposing them to possible injury if they participate in activities that hyperextend or radically flex the neck or upper spine, the following precautions must be taken before permitting athletes with Down syndrome to participate in certain physical activities:

1. Athletes with Down syndrome may participate in most Special Olympics sports training and competition, but shall not be permitted to participate in any activities which, by their nature, result in hyper-extension, radical flexion or direct pressure on the neck or upper spine, unless the requirements below are satisfied. Such sports training and competition activities include: butterfly stroke and diving starts in swimming, pentathlon, high jump, squat lifts, equestrian sports, artistic gymnastics, football (soccer), alpine skiing and any warm-up exercises placing undue stress on the head and neck.
2. An athlete with Down syndrome may be permitted to participate in the activities described above if that athlete is examined (including x-ray views of full extension and flexion of neck) by a physician who has been briefed on the nature of the Atlanto-axial instability condition, and who determines, based on the results of that examination, that the athlete does not have an Atlanto-axial instability condition.
3. An athlete with Down syndrome who has been diagnosed by a physician as having Atlanto-axial instability condition may nevertheless be permitted to participate in the activities described above if the athlete, or the parent or guardian of a minor athlete, confirms in writing his or her decision to proceed with these activities notwithstanding the risks created by the Atlanto-axial instability, and two (2) Licensed Medical Professionals certify in writing that they have explained these risks to the athlete and his/her parent or guardian, and that the athlete's condition does not, in their judgment, preclude the athlete from participating in Special Olympics. These statements and certifications shall be documented and provided to the Program office using the "Special Release for Athletes with Atlanto-axial Instability."