

Women in sport

Many more women than ever before are getting involved in sport – running, rugby, golf – you name it. And while women can get involved in any sport that men are involved in it's important to remember that men and women are not the same. Yes, we both like to win, but women's bodies are not simply a smaller version of men's. There are issues women involved in sport need to be aware of.

Bone density: Weight bearing exercise has been shown to have a protective effect against osteoporosis for women of all ages. However this is only against the background of a normal hormonal system. Heavy levels of exercise and a low body weight have a negative effect on the hormonal system of the premenopausal woman. Young women who are exercising very hard and who have a low weight may have very infrequent periods, or they may stop altogether. When this happens estrogen levels drop. Estrogen is vital for maintaining hard tough bones, so that when the level drops for a significant period of time the bones start to get thinner. Add to this many miles of pounding on the road or on a treadmill and you have the perfect recipe for stress fractures. The bones of the feet are the most common site followed by the shin and often the hip and spine. This is a very serious problem and can have lifelong consequences. If you are a serious female runner and your menstrual cycle is irregular or absent, especially if you have persistent pain on running, you should see your GP immediately.

Continence issues: By the time they reach 60 most Irish women will experience some problems with bladder control. With exercise the most commonly experienced problem is stress incontinence, where you suffer a 'leak' on exertion. This should not stop you exercising. Seek the advice of your GP who may refer you on to a urologist for tests or to a Chartered Physiotherapist specialising in women's health. A programme of pelvic floor exercises may be all you need to give you peace of mind when you're out preparing for the Clare People 10k!

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