

# Performance anxiety and pre-game stress

By Steve Olson  
ATC, CSCS

A coach wrote in this week looking for answers. He has two players on his team that suffer from anxiety before big games.

They get nervous and complain of stomach cramping, dry mouth, nausea, diarrhea and occasional vomiting. He states once the game starts it takes about five minutes for them to get into the flow. He is concerned that the diarrhea and vomiting may be causing dehydration and with playoff games ahead, they may go through this more frequently.

This is a good question and a difficult one to answer. Performance anxiety and pre-game stress are not uncommon in competitive sports and can cause problems with dehydration, cramping, and decreased performance. The upper gastrointestinal tract function can be affected through decreased acid secretion in the stomach, slowed intestinal motility, or decreased blood flow. Continued anxiety can lead to hypersecretion of stomach acids, increased motility, or decreased transit time resulting in diarrhea.

There can be many reasons why athletes suffer from performance anxiety and pre-game stress. It is not unusual that these symptoms may be present or more pronounced before events that are more important. Many coaches might pass this off as just nervousness or something the athlete ate. One should be concerned if there are repeated episodes. The causes may be related to a pre-game meal along with nervousness but, ultimately, they are probably psychological in nature.

Treatment involves reassurance and



## ASK THE DOCTOR

By Dr. Jeff S. Pierce



education about the body's processes; relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, passive and active relaxation, soothing music and therapeutic massage can be beneficial. Changing pre-game routines focusing on concentration skills, positive imagery and confidence training may also be necessary.

Referral to a psychologist or sports psychologist may also be a good idea. These symptoms might be affecting other aspects of the athletes' life such as academics.

Performance anxiety and pre-game stress are rarely severe enough to be considered a significant health concern for most athletes. From a performance standpoint they can be detrimental. A good coach will work with these athletes, the team athletic trainer, parents and team physician to help the athlete overcome this. If you have specific concerns regarding performance anxiety and pre-game stress please contact us at the Michigan Sports & Spine Center.

Steve Olson works with Dr. Jeff S. Pierce, founder of the Michigan Sports and Spine Center (MSSC). The center focuses on treating all types of athletes,

with proper examination, which leads to the correct diagnosis. An appropriate therapy program is established based on the results of the evaluation.

Dr. Pierce is a Sports Medicine Rehab Specialist and is the founder of the MSSC. He has been taking care of Little Caesars AAA Midget teams for four years and continues to help out with all AAA Travel teams.

He also takes care of all of U-M Dearborn athletes and the ABA Dogs players.

He is a board member of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness. MSSC's main office is located in the Troy Sports Center in coordination with the Training Room, the Official Training Center for the Detroit Red Wings. Our other locations are in Farmington Hills and Garden City.

Pre-season physicals are always available for all ages at Michigan Sports and Spine Center. Write us at 1819 E. Big Beaver, Suite 210, Troy, MI 48083; call 248-680-9000 or visit our website at [www.michigansportsandspinecenter.com](http://www.michigansportsandspinecenter.com). Good luck to all our competitors.

We look forward to hearing from you.