

## CARE OF THE WILDERNESS ATHLETE

# Ethical, Legal, and Administrative Considerations for Preparticipation Evaluation for Wilderness Sports and Adventures

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Preparticipation evaluations (PPEs) are common in team, organized, or traditional sports but not common in wilderness sports or adventures. Regarding ethical, legal, and administrative considerations, the same principles can be used as in traditional sports. Clinicians should be trained to perform such a PPE to avoid missing essential components and to maximize the quality of the PPE. In general, participants' privacy should be observed; office-based settings may be best for professional and billing purposes, and adequate documentation of a complete evaluation, including clearance issues, should be essential components. Additional environmental and personal health issues relative to the wilderness activity should be documented, and referral for further screening should be made as deemed necessary, if unable to be performed by the primary clinician. Travel medicine principles should be incorporated, and recommendations for travel or adventure insurance should be made.

*Key words:* preparticipation evaluation, wilderness medicine, ethics, legal

## Introduction

The ethical, legal, and administrative considerations that apply to sports preparticipation evaluations (PPEs) can be extrapolated from conventional or team sports and applied to wilderness sports or adventure activities. These have not been previously described in the literature. By taking conventional ideas and principles of traditional sports PPE and applying them to the unconventional, austere, and often remote, wilderness environment, a PPE for the wilderness sports and adventures can be performed in much the same way. This article reviews the current literature on ethical, legal, and administrative issues for traditional sports PPE and applies these

principles to wilderness sports and adventures, making specific recommendations for this population.

## Methods

Authors searched the MEDLINE database from 1946 to present via PubMed and OVID with the key terms *ethics, jurisprudence, preparticipation, and injury prevention*. Studies were limited to the English language. These articles were reviewed, and if applicable, they were integrated into the current article. Additionally, we relied upon the format as presented by Bernhardt and Roberts<sup>1</sup> for the traditional PPE model, to translate to wilderness athletes and adventurers.

## Results

Findings of the literature review of selected published articles and recommendations from the book *PPE: Preparticipation Physical Evaluation, fourth Ed. 2010*<sup>1</sup> were consolidated and translated to wilderness athletes and adventurers as discussed in the sections below.

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## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical considerations of the traditional PPE revolve around the balance of “the right to participate” versus the principles of “do no harm.”<sup>1,2</sup> Similarly, the traditional ethical tenets for wilderness medicine are as follows: (1) do no harm, (2) beneficence (welfare of the participant), (3) autonomy (freedom from external control), and (4) justice.<sup>3–5</sup> These ethics and those of climbing and mountain sport participation can be transposed into other austere or remote environments.<sup>6</sup> The differences and similarities between the conventional sports PPE and the PPE for wilderness sports and adventures are not always obvious. However, the established PPE principles are relevant for clinicians who evaluate wilderness athletes or adventurers. This is true in the preparticipation setting, or during care for individuals in wilderness environments, with modifications to address the specific risks of the wilderness environment.

As with many physical examinations, it is possible that individuals seeking a PPE before a wilderness event have not had a physical examination by another clinician in quite some time. Often, it is the event itself that prompts the request for a physical examination by the individual. In other cases, such as guided mountaineering expeditions, participants may have been asked to have an evaluation by a clinician to ensure health while on the trip.

Fundamentals of the PPE involve an opportunity to cover elements of a standard sport screening and a preventive physical examination, as well as sport-specific screening. The majority of health issues will be identified by the history alone, and the goal is not to disqualify rather to identify health risks and strive for prevention.<sup>1</sup> The evaluation should be as follows: (1) professional; (2) involve common sense and an explanation of the process and components of the history and physical examination; and (3) observe gender-specific issues. Clinicians performing the PPE should be adequately trained and well versed in the principles of the PPE and sport-specific issues, using literature-based references whenever available. Additional referral may be necessary depending on issues that may be identified.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the clinician has a responsibility to clear or restrict the participant for his or her planned activity. Clearance can be without restriction, clearance with specific recommendations, or restriction, either with special accommodation or complete disqualification depending on the issue. Disqualification is rare and not the goal of the PPE. As of 2011, Peterson and Bernhardt state, “In the largest evaluation of the PPE only 1.9% of 2729 high school athletes were disqualified from sports

participation, and only 11.9% required any type of follow up evaluation.”<sup>7</sup> Disqualification or restriction is seldom made by a single clinician but rather in combination with an appropriate specialist after a thorough and issue-specific evaluation. If restricted or disqualified, participants may elect to seek a second opinion or legal consultation. The clinician must prepare thorough documentation to state objective facts about the findings, specialty consultation recommendations, and reasons for restriction or disqualification.

The issues pertaining to minors participating in wilderness sports or adventures warrant focused consideration. The PPE for minors should be viewed in a similar fashion as adults in that a standard well child or sports physical should include attention to immunizations, vital signs, visual acuity, body mass index, current physical condition, identification of any active health issues, and anticipatory guidance, in addition to any particular issues that are pertinent to the proposed activity. In cases in which the parents will also be involved in the wilderness sport or adventure, the health of the child should be considered independent of the goals of the family.

Clinicians performing a PPE should understand that any sport has inherent risk, yet wilderness sports and adventures may pose higher risks than conventional sports conducted in more controlled environments based on the remote or austere setting in which they typically take place. Risk tolerance is relative to the individual, and ultimately, acceptance of that risk should be up to the individual assuming that there is no personal history or physical examination findings suggesting an increased risk or harm by participating.

Participants in wilderness activities should be made aware that although they may not meet disqualification criteria, they might actually hinder an expedition due to health conditions, and group dynamics and risks should be considered. Documentation should involve the participant completion of a health history form that the clinician has reviewed. Any additional focused intervention should take place based on the history and physical condition. Counseling should also be documented and directed toward where to find additional information. Referral to a specialist more skilled in a specific area of wilderness medicine should be used when necessary. This may include referral to a clinician trained in conducting a wilderness sports or adventure PPE.

## LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

The PPE is often required for participants before organized wilderness sports or adventures. The findings may be important for the safety and comfort of the

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