

# Physical Awareness a Key to Improving Adolescent Male Health: A Grounded Theory Study of the Perception of Testicular Self-examination in Male Student Athletes

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## ABSTRACT

There is a significant discrepancy between men and women in their utilization of preventative physicals, resulting in insufficient knowledge of healthy behaviors in men including testicular cancer (TC) awareness. In a review of records, 34.9% of students had awareness of TC identification, which increased to 72.7% in student athletes. This study was designed to explore the view of TC awareness from the student athlete perspective and develop a substantive theory. Focus groups with athletes were conducted and analyzed using classic grounded theory. The basic social process emerged as physicality with a basic structural process of physical awareness, which serves to organize the student's self-concept or identity as an athlete. A high level of physical awareness may account for student athletes' increased awareness of TC and affinity for testicular self-examination. Understanding the nature of physicality and how it leads to a heightened physical awareness could improve how health care providers engage their male patients in health prevention topics.

**Keywords:** men's health, physical awareness, student athletes, testicular cancer, testicular self-examination

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One important topic that is often not addressed with young male patients is the importance of testicular cancer (TC) awareness and the ability to perform a testicular self-examination (TSE). Although the treatments for TC are very successful, it remains the third leading cause of cancer deaths in men from age 18 to 50 years.<sup>1</sup> If TC is found and treated before it has metastasized, there is a significant reduction in morbidity and mortality.<sup>2</sup> Although there is controversy regarding current TC screening guidelines, there is consensus that a high level of TC awareness from health care providers and the general population will lead to improved patient outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, health care professionals often do not take the time to initiate a conversation about the fact that TC is the most common cancer in American men ages 15 to 35 and impacts approximately 5.5 out of every 100,000 men annually.<sup>4</sup> Research findings support a significant lack of knowledge among men regarding

the potential signs of TC and the risk it poses if not diagnosed at an early stage.<sup>5</sup> If health care providers and professionals are not initiating conversations regarding TC awareness, young men will not have the knowledge necessary to identify the early signs of TC, which could lead to earlier rates of detection and a reduction in the morbidity and mortality.<sup>2,6</sup>

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question that guided this study was the following: What is the view of TSE from the student athlete perspective?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The United States and other Western health care systems are continually searching for ways to improve preventative health care practices. Organizations like the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) exist solely to provide health care professionals with the latest research-based

recommendations on how to best provide their patients with preventative services, such as annual health examinations, cervical cancer screening, colonoscopy, breast cancer screening, and many more.<sup>7</sup> Participation in preventative health care services is positively correlated with improved health and early detection of disease.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there are many discrepancies in the utilization of preventative health care services based on factors, such as income, race, geographic location, and sex. According to a Gallup poll, only 66% of men under 50 years of age have ever had an annual preventative health examination compared with 79% of women under 50 years of age who have had 1 or more annual preventative health examinations.<sup>9</sup> This discrepancy in seeking preventative care starts at an early age. For example, at the Montreal Children's Hospital, 85% to 90% of the adolescents seeking preventative care were female.<sup>10</sup>

Many different factors account for why women are more likely to seek preventative care over men. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is the fact that primary health care providers are 3 times more likely to discuss important preventative measures with their female adolescent patients compared with their male adolescent patients.<sup>11</sup> Preventative measures like cervical cancer screening through Pap smear and breast examination keep more women returning for preventative examinations to receive these sex-specific services.

Health care providers are often more comfortable discussing female issues, such as menstrual problems, female contraception, and mental health issues related to eating disorders, which are more predominant in young women versus men. Unfortunately, many health care providers are less skilled in engaging their adolescent male patients in issues they face and in explaining the importance of health care prevention through physical awareness of the male patient's health, both on the part of the health care provider and the male patient.<sup>10</sup>

Fifty-five percent of all high school students participate in school sports.<sup>12</sup> Because a sports physical is required to participate in most sporting activities, health care providers must use this opportunity to connect with young male patients and discuss the important role physical awareness and preventative

care play in their health and their ability to participate in physical activity.<sup>13</sup>

Health care providers who are knowledgeable about common concerns and problems in young men can help these patients identify issues that will affect their health at an early stage. Providers also have the necessary knowledge to prevent common issues specific to young men.<sup>10,14</sup> The most common issue facing young men, which is often not addressed in the primary care setting, is sexual and reproductive health.<sup>11</sup> Other topics, such as violence, dangerous activities, substance abuse, mental health, and academic success, are also important to address with young men, but sexual and reproductive health issues are more difficult to discuss because young men are often not comfortable bringing up these issues.<sup>10,15</sup>

Health care providers need to improve the utilization of preventative physicals, engage young men in conversations that lead to improvements in lifestyle and health-related actions, and stress the importance of physical awareness.<sup>10</sup> Health care providers who are able to foster trust through their ability to engage in meaningful conversations are more likely to cause meaningful change in their young male patients' lives through health care education. It is important to have a thorough knowledge of common health care concerns and problems that young men face, such as an increased risk of TC, to guide conversations in a direction most likely to impact behavior or knowledge and cause a positive change in health-related action.<sup>10</sup> Awareness of TC is 1 of several issues that health care providers should discuss with their young male patients during their sports physical or annual examination.<sup>13</sup>

A thorough knowledge of TC includes incorporating the most current evidence-based guidelines into patient practice by each health care provider. However, for topics like TC awareness, it is important for providers to remember that even though TSE may not be recommended by many preventative health organizations, it is still just as important for providers to educate young male patients on the importance of TC awareness.<sup>3</sup> The USPSTF and several other organizations do not recommend that providers perform or teach TSE to their asymptomatic patients.<sup>16</sup> The USPSTF cites that patient outcomes and the ability to detect cancer at an earlier stage are not improved with regular self-examination

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