

SPORTS & ATHLETICS – COMPLETE GUIDE FOR ALL AGES (5-18 Years)

SpectrumCareHub Independence Series

Introduction

Sports build motor skills, cardiovascular health, self-regulation, social connection, and confidence in autistic children and teens. Research shows that sensory-based athletics improve motor coordination, social responsiveness, and emotional control when activities target balance, body awareness, and touch processing systems. However, traditional sports environments trigger intense overload from whistles, shouting, echoing gyms, bright lights, tight uniforms, and crowded chaos. Many families quit too soon, assuming their child is not athletic, when the real barriers are sensory mismatch, unclear instructions, or social anxiety. This guide helps families choose sports that match their child's nervous system, prepare coaches with concrete strategies, pack sensory kits with nutrition support, and build self-advocacy skills. Young children benefit from low-pressure activities like swimming or martial arts that emphasize mastery over competition. Tweens need support navigating tryouts, competitive pressure, and communicating needs to coaches. Teens require independence in coach communication, training decisions, and evaluating whether sports serve their goals or cause burnout. The biomedical section covers nutrition timing, hydration, blood sugar stability, protein needs, recovery support, and recognizing pain signals.

Childhood (5–10 Years): Building Movement Confidence

Young children thrive in low-pressure sports emphasizing skill development over competition. Swimming activates sensory systems while reducing gravitational stress. Martial arts provide structure, predictable routines, and respect-based interaction. Small soccer clinics and gymnastics develop coordination without team chaos. Research shows sports training using sensory integration techniques like balance boards, trampolines, and weighted balls improves motor skills, social participation, and emotional regulation. The goal is fun, movement confidence, and positive associations with physical activity.

Core Sports Principles (Ages 5-10)

Principle	Why It Works	How to Start
Skills over competition	Reduces anxiety; builds confidence through mastery	Choose clinics, not leagues; focus on learning specific movements

Principle	Why It Works	How to Start
Small groups (6-10 kids)	Less chaos, clearer coaching, more attention	Avoid crowded rec leagues; seek specialized programs
Predictable routines	Same warm-up and drill order reduces anxiety	Ask coaches for consistent structure
Sensory accommodations	Prevents cumulative overload and meltdowns	Call ahead; explain needs; bring tools
Multi-sensory activities	Activates balance, body awareness, touch systems	Choose swimming, martial arts, obstacle courses

Sensory Overload Checklist (Ages 5-10)

Trigger	Common Signs	Management Strategy
Sound	Covers ears at whistle, cries when coach yells	Earplugs on sideline; coach uses hand signals near child
Visual	Loses track of fast balls, squints at lights	Sunglasses outdoors; choose slower-paced sports (swimming, martial arts)
Tactile	Refuses uniform, shin guards, tight socks	Compression shirt under uniform; remove all tags; bring extra dry clothes
Movement	Afraid of falling, trouble balancing	Start with low balance beams, gentle trampolines, swimming
Body awareness	Bumps teammates, misjudges distances	Use weighted balls, resistance bands, martial arts for feedback
Social	Anxious on bench, freezes when watched	Parent sits farther back; practice turn-taking at home

Pre-Season Coach Script (Ages 5-10)

"Hi Coach, my 7-year-old is autistic and excited to join. They learn best with clear, simple instructions given one step at a time. Showing them the movement with your body helps more than long verbal directions. They may need a quieter spot for short sensory breaks if practices get overwhelming. Please do not blow a whistle right next to them, as sudden

loud sounds are difficult to process. They may need you to demonstrate drills more than once. If they cover their ears or walk away, they are experiencing overload and need about two minutes in a quiet corner before returning. I am happy to meet before the first practice. Thank you for coaching."

Sports Packing List (Ages 5-10)

Category	Items	Purpose	Warnings
Sensory Tools	Earplugs or headphones, sunglasses, compression shirt, weighted lap pad	Blocks noise, reduces glare, provides calming pressure	Ensure age-appropriate weight; supervise use
Comfort	Tag-free clothes, extra socks, towel, familiar water bottle	Reduces tactile irritation; builds comfort	Wash new clothes 2-3 times before wearing
Regulation	Silent fidget, chewy necklace, resistance band	Keeps hands and mouth busy during waits	Inspect chewies for damage; replace if broken (choking risk)
Food & Hydration	String cheese (dairy allergy warning), nuts (nut allergy warning), hard-boiled eggs (egg allergy warning), water, electrolyte powder	Stabilizes blood sugar; prevents irritability and fatigue	Check all food allergies; avoid high-sugar snacks; read electrolyte labels for caffeine, dyes, allergens
Documents	One-page coach summary: "What Helps / What to Avoid"	Quick reference for coaching staff	Update if needs change
Backup clothing	Complete change of clothes in car	Immediate relief if uniform becomes intolerable	Keep set in car year-round

Visual Schedule – Practice Day (Ages 5-10)

Time	Activity	Details
3:00 PM	After-school snack	Protein + fat: cheese (dairy allergy warning), crackers, nut butter (nut allergy warning), water
3:20 PM	Change clothes	Same order: bathroom, socks, shorts, shirt, shoes; pack water
3:30 PM	Drive to facility	Review sports rules: listen to coach, try your best, take turns
3:45 PM	Arrive 10 minutes early	Walk perimeter; sit in car if anxious; put on sunglasses or earplugs
3:55 PM	Enter and greet coach	Say "Hi, Coach!" or wave; find spot for bag
4:00 PM	Warm-up	Predictable: jog 2 laps, stretch legs 5 min, stretch arms 3 min
4:10 PM	Skills station 1	Coach demonstrates, child tries; 10-minute rotation
4:20 PM	Water break	2-3 min to drink, use fidget, sit with weighted pad
4:25 PM	Skills station 2	Second skill; coach gives simple feedback
4:35 PM	Cool-down or scrimmage	Stretching; scrimmage is optional—watching counts too
4:45 PM	High-five teammates	Quick social closure; exit before dismissal crowd
5:00 PM	Home rest	Quiet time; no homework for 30 min; allow decompression

Parent Scripts (Ages 5-10)

Before Season: "Sports are about trying new things and having fun. You do not have to be perfect or win. Your job is to try hard, listen to Coach, and do your best. If something feels

too hard, too loud, or confusing, tell me or Coach and we will take a break. Breaks are okay."

Before Practice: "We will start with a warm-up, then Coach will teach you a drill. If you do not understand, ask Coach to show you again. If your ears hurt from noise or you feel tired, wave to me and we will take a water break. We will stay for warm-up and drills, then see how you feel about the game."

To Coach: "If he covers his ears, the noise is too much. A two-minute sideline break with his weighted pad helps him reset. If he looks confused, showing him the movement instead of just talking helps him understand. He learns best with small steps and visual demonstrations."

After Practice: "You ran, tried drills, and listened to Coach. That is what practice is about. It does not matter if you scored or were the fastest. You showed up and tried hard. Let's go home for a snack and rest."

When Child Wants to Quit: "Let's figure out what part is hard. Is it noise? Understanding Coach? Waiting your turn? Being tired? Once we know, we can make a plan to fix it. We will try our plan for two more practices. If it is still too hard, we can decide together whether to take a break or try a different sport."

Meltdown Recovery (Ages 5-10)

1. Move to quiet space immediately—car, empty hallway, quiet outdoor spot.
2. Offer water first, then protein snack. Dehydration and low blood sugar amplify overload.
 - **Warning: Check food allergies before offering snacks; ensure child is calm enough to chew safely.**
3. Add deep pressure if child responds well—firm hug, weighted pad, shoulder squeeze.
4. Use breathing or grounding—count breaths (four in, hold four, out four); name five things you see.
5. Skip scrimmage or leave early. Watching from sidelines or leaving counts as success.
6. End on positive note: "You made it through warm-ups and two drills. That is real progress. Your body needed a break and you told me. That was right."

7. Debrief later when calm: "What was hardest? What helped? What should we change next time?"
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Tweens (10-14 Years): Competition and Self-Advocacy

Tweens face competitive tryouts, being picked last, and louder social dynamics. Success comes from choosing sports that match their sensory profile—swimming, track, martial arts, rock climbing, tennis, golf—and teaching self-advocacy with coaches. Executive function challenges emerge: remembering practice times, packing gear, following multi-step drills, managing homework alongside athletics.

Sensory and Social Challenges (Ages 10-14)

Challenge	Signs	Strategy
Social pressure	Anxiety about tryouts, being cut, ranked publicly	Choose rec leagues over competitive; focus on individual sports; celebrate personal improvement
Executive function	Forgets times, loses gear, confused by multi-step drills	Laminated schedule on wall; phone alarms; checklist on door; pack night before
Sound overload	Distress from pep bands, crowd noise, gym echo	Earplugs during games; choose quieter sports; sit away from band
Tactile discomfort	Sweaty uniforms, protective gear, shared locker rooms	Bring extra dry clothes; change in private stall; wear moisture-wicking layers
Movement anxiety	Fear of collision sports, quick direction changes	Avoid high-contact sports; try swimming, track, tennis, martial arts
Peer teasing	Targeted for being different, left out, not passed ball	Choose inclusive programs; speak with coach about team culture; switch teams if bullying persists

Pre-Season Coach Email (Ages 10-14)

"Hi coach, my 12-year-old is on the spectrum and wants to join the team. They learn drills more easily when you demonstrate the movements and explain step-by-step, rather than with long verbal instructions. They do well with predictable routines at each practice, like starting with the same warm-up sequence. If practice gets very loud, they may need to step out of a noisy huddle for two minutes to get water and use a fidget, then return ready to

focus. They are hardworking kids who do best when they know what to expect. I am happy to meet before the first practice. Thank you for coaching."

Tween Sports Kit

Category	Items	Purpose	Warnings
Gear Organization	Labeled bag, mesh laundry bag, carabiner clips, extra socks and shirt	Prevents lost items; separates clean from dirty	Pack night before using checklist
Sensory Regulation	Foam earplugs, cooling towel, quiet fidget in pocket	Manages sound and heat; provides input during waits	Fidget must be quiet; earplugs should allow hearing coach
Planning Tools	Laminated schedule on wall, phone alarms, printed roster	Builds independence; reduces parent reminding	Tween sets own alarms; parent monitors
Nutrition	Protein bar (check allergens), turkey roll-ups (deli meat allergy warning), trail mix (nut allergy warning), electrolyte packets, water bottle	Prevents blood sugar crash that amplifies sensitivity	Check protein bars for peanuts, tree nuts, soy, dairy, gluten; read electrolyte labels for dyes, caffeine, sugar
Documentation	Emergency card with contacts and allergies; written plays; self-advocacy card	Safety if separated; supports visual learners	Update each season

Visual Schedule – Tween Practice

Time	Activity	Details
4:00 PM	Homework & snack	Priority assignments; protein bar or sandwich; 12-16 oz water

Time	Activity	Details
4:30 PM	Pack bag	Check door list: water, uniform, cleats, towel, gear, extra socks; place by door
4:45 PM	Drive	Review one focus: "I will work on my passing accuracy"; mental prep, not homework
5:00 PM	Warm-up	Same sequence: jog 2 laps, dynamic stretching, sport-specific warm-up
5:15 PM	Drill stations	Rotate every 10-15 min; if confused: "Can you show me that drill one more time?"
5:45 PM	Scrimmage	Full participation or sit out and watch—both valid
6:00 PM	Cool-down	Slow lap, static stretching, team huddle; high-five coach; exit before chaos
6:15 PM	Home	Rehydrate, dinner with protein and vegetables, 30 min quiet time, shower, light homework only

Self-Advocacy Phrases (Ages 10-14)

Situation	Self-Advocacy Phrase
Confused about drill	"Can you show me that drill one more time? I want to make sure I have the footwork right."
Whistle too loud	"The whistle is really loud and bothers my ears. Can I stand a little farther back during that part?"
Feeling overloaded	"I am feeling overloaded with the noise and movement. Can I take a two-minute water break and then rejoin?"
Need clearer instructions	"Can you show me with your body what you want me to do? That helps me understand better than just hearing it."
Don't understand terminology	"What does [term] mean? Can you explain that word differently?"

Situation	Self-Advocacy Phrase
Need predictability	"Can you tell me what order we will do drills today? It helps me focus when I know what to expect."

Parent Scripts (Ages 10-14)

Before Practice: "Pick one thing to improve today—speed, positioning, listening to Coach, or teamwork. At the end, we will talk about that one thing. You cannot improve everything in one day."

After Practice: "What went well? What was hard? Was there anything Coach said that confused you or made practice harder? If you tell me, we can decide whether to email Coach or plan differently for next time."

Before Game: "Your job is effort and attitude. You control how hard you try and how you encourage teammates. You do not control the score. Focus on your position and your job. Do that with full effort."

Tryout Anxiety: "Everyone is nervous at tryouts. Your job is to show up, try your hardest, and show coaches your effort and attitude. If you do not make this team, it does not mean you are bad at sports. It might mean this team is not the right fit. We will find what fits you."

Meltdown Recovery (Ages 10-14)

1. Exit to sideline or car for 5-10 minutes. No lectures yet.
 2. Ask one calm question: "Is it noise, tired body, confusion about drills, or something social?"
 3. Address the issue. If confusion, rehearse drill away from group. If noise, offer earplugs. If fatigue, provide protein and water.
 - **Warning: Check food allergies before offering snacks.**
 4. Decide: rejoin or finish early. Both valid. Tween communicates to coach: "I am overloaded today and need to stop early."
 5. Debrief later at home: "What would help next time? Different tool? Different role? Talk to coach?"
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Teens (14-18 Years): Independence and Burnout Prevention

Teens can use sports for college admissions, leadership, scholarships, and lifelong fitness—or face burnout if the wrong sport or intensity is chosen. Teens must lead communication with coaches about autism needs. Roles beyond star player are valuable: team manager, statistician, equipment manager, specialized positions. The key question: does this sport energize or drain me?

Teen Sports Profile (Ages 14-18)

Area	Challenges	Solutions
Social identity	Team hierarchy, captain roles, locker room teasing, fitting in	Choose inclusive teams; consider manager or stats roles; self-advocate openly
Executive function	Balancing sports, homework, sleep, job, college apps	Use shared digital calendar; prioritize sleep; build buffer time
Physical demands	Conditioning, recognizing pain vs. soreness, hydration, recovery	Track sleep, soreness, mood daily; rest is part of training; speak up about pain
Sensory overload	Stadium lights, announcers, bands, crowds, body contact	Earplugs or bone-conduction headphones; arrive early to acclimate
Academic pressure	Torn between athletics and grades; playing for college resume	Have honest conversation about why playing; re-evaluate every season

Pre-Season Coach Meeting (Teen-Led)

"Hi Coach, I am [name] and I am on the autism spectrum. I want to share how I work best. I am strong at [name strength—endurance, strategy, detail, consistency]. I may miss verbal cues when it is very loud, so hand signals or written notes help. If I seem to shut down, I probably need a two-minute reset at the edge of the field, then I can return focused. I learn plays best when I see them written or drawn, in addition to hearing them. If you have feedback for me, specific examples like 'move three steps left on that play' help more than general comments like 'do better.' Can we agree on a communication plan? I am happy to check in weekly. Thank you for coaching."

Teen Athlete Kit

Category	Items	Purpose	Warnings
Performance	Two large water bottles, electrolyte powder, protein snacks (bars (check allergens), jerky (check sodium), trail mix (nut allergy warning)), foam roller	Maintains energy; prevents dehydration and injury	Check electrolyte ingredients for caffeine, artificial colors, allergens; excessive sodium can cause problems with high blood pressure or kidney issues; consult doctor before supplements
Sensory Regulation	Foam earplugs or bone-conduction headphones, polarized sunglasses, hat, cooling towel	Reduces overwhelm during competition	Do not block safety sounds; ensure shatterproof sunglasses if required
Organization	Printed weekly schedule, shared digital calendar, phone alarms 30 min before departure, backup clothes in car	Prevents missed practices and overcommitment	Set recurring alarms; review calendar every Sunday
Recovery	Epsom salt for baths, magnesium supplement (if doctor-approved), stretching routine card, trigger point ball	Reduces soreness, supports sleep, improves flexibility	Magnesium can interact with antibiotics, blood pressure meds, muscle relaxants; can cause diarrhea at high doses; consult doctor; Epsom baths not for open wounds or certain skin conditions
Self-Advocacy	Card: "Autistic athlete. May need brief reset breaks. Uses earplugs.	Empowers communication without lengthy explanations	Update each season; share with trainers and officials

Category	Items	Purpose	Warnings
	Appreciates written instructions."		

Visual Schedule – Teen Game Day

Time	Activity	Details
6:30 AM	Protein breakfast	Eggs (egg allergy warning) or Greek yogurt (dairy allergy warning), toast, banana, 16 oz water
8:00 AM	School	Light academic load if possible; avoid major tests; stay hydrated
3:30 PM	Pre-game snack	Protein bar or turkey sandwich (deli meat allergy warning), 16 oz water; review plays and position
4:00 PM	Arrive at venue	Change, personal warm-up, foam roller, earplugs if loud
4:30 PM	Team warm-up	Structured warm-up; focus on breathing; stay hydrated
5:00 PM	Game starts	Focus on role; self-talk: "Do my job. Control effort."; breathe between plays
7:00 PM	Post-game cool-down	Jog 5 min, static stretching, rehydrate (20-32 oz)
7:15 PM	Coach check-in	Listen to feedback; ask questions; thank coach
7:30 PM	Change and depart	Comfortable clothes; small recovery snack if dinner delayed
8:00 PM	Recovery meal	Protein, complex carbs, vegetables; rehydrate; 20-30 min quiet time (no screens)
9:30 PM	Sleep prep	Warm shower or Epsom bath, screen-free, cool dark room, bed by 10 PM; aim for 8-9 hours

Teen Self-Advocacy Phrases

Situation	Advocacy Phrase
Noise overwhelming	"Coach, can I get that instruction one more time in a quieter moment or written down? I want to execute it correctly."
Need reset	"Coach, I need a two-minute reset at the sideline to refocus. I will be ready after that."
Clarify role	"Can we go over my specific responsibilities? I want to be clear on what you need from me before we start."
Request written info	"Can you text or write the play sequence? I process information better when I can see it written."
Feedback on environment	"The locker room music makes it hard to focus on what you are saying. Can we turn it down during meetings?"
Communicate fatigue	"Coach, I am feeling really drained this week. I think I might be overtraining. Can we adjust my intensity so I do not get injured or burn out?"

Parent Scripts (Ages 14-18)

Before Season: "What do you want from this sport? Fitness, friendships, college apps, scholarships, or fun? Be honest. If your reason is strong, we will support you. If you are only playing because you think you should, that is not sustainable. Sports are a choice. You decide what serves your goals."

During Slump: "You seem frustrated. Is this burnout, confusion about your role, too much sensory input, a conflict with coach or teammate, or feeling like you are not improving? Let's name the problem before deciding to quit. Sometimes we adjust the role or intensity, not abandon the sport."

Before Big Games: "Your job is to eat, drink, breathe, and do your specific job. Crowd noise is background. Scouts are looking for effort, consistency, and teamwork, not perfection. Your teammates count on you to do your part with focus and effort. Control what you control."

College Discussion: "If you want to play in college, we will support you in reaching out to coaches. If you want to stop after high school, that is okay too. Playing in college is 20-30

hours per week on top of academics. Make sure it is what you genuinely want. Your mental health matters more than impressing anyone."

Meltdown and Burnout Recovery (Ages 14-18)

Short-Term (Immediate):

1. Remove from noise—car, hallway, quiet corner, training room.
2. Hydrate and offer protein snack. Address physiological needs first.
 - **Warning: Check food allergies.**
3. Deep breathing or grounding—four counts in, hold four, out four, repeat five times; name five things you see.
4. Return when ready or finish early. Teen communicates to coach. No shame.

Medium-Term (Frequent Overload):

1. Reduce intensity—drop travel team for rec league; attend fewer optional practices; eliminate early morning or late sessions.
2. Change roles—shift from starter to bench with less pressure; try specialized position; explore manager, stats, or equipment roles.
3. Switch to individual sports—move from team to solo: swimming, track, tennis, golf, martial arts, cycling.

Long-Term (Deep Burnout):

1. Evaluate if sport fits nervous system and goals. Ask: "Does this energize or drain me? Do I look forward to it or dread it? Am I playing for myself or someone else?"
2. If answer is drain and dread, permission to stop is critical. Try new sport, take full season off, or shift to fitness-only without competition.
3. Prioritize mental health. If anxiety, depression, sleep problems, or eating issues emerge, pause sports and consult mental health professional immediately.

Post-Activity Reflection (All Ages)

After each season or when considering changes:

Question	Purpose
What sport seemed to fit best?	Identifies strengths and sensory compatibility
What was hardest: noise, confusion, social pressure, time management, or physical demands?	Pinpoints barriers that can be addressed
Which supports helped most?	Reinforces effective strategies
What would I change next season?	Empowers proactive planning
Do I stay, change roles, try new sport, or take break?	Validates choice and prevents burnout
Am I playing for myself or someone else?	Encourages authentic decision-making

Biomedical Considerations and Body-Support Notes

Sports place significant physical demands on the body through cardiovascular stress, muscle breakdown and repair, fluid and electrolyte loss, and nervous system activation. Autistic individuals may have specific needs around nutrition timing, hydration awareness, recovery protocols, and recognizing body signals that indicate injury versus normal soreness.

Blood Sugar Stability and Pre-Activity Nutrition

Low blood sugar amplifies sensory sensitivity, irritability, and meltdown risk. Hunger after school is common because lunch was hours earlier. Eating protein paired with healthy fat 30-60 minutes before practice stabilizes blood glucose and provides sustained energy. Good options include string cheese (dairy allergy warning), hard-boiled eggs (egg allergy warning), nut butter (nut allergy warning) with apple slices, turkey slices (deli meat allergy warning), or Greek yogurt (dairy allergy warning). Avoid high-sugar snacks like candy, juice, or sweetened granola bars that cause rapid spikes followed by crashes that worsen behavior and focus.

Warning: Always check for food allergies, food intolerances, and any medical dietary restrictions before offering new snacks. Some children have difficulty recognizing hunger signals and may need scheduled eating times rather than relying on feeling hungry.

Hydration and Electrolyte Balance

Dehydration worsens fatigue, confusion, sensory sensitivity, irritability, and muscle cramps. Autistic individuals may have difficulty recognizing thirst or may avoid drinking due to sensory aversion to water taste or bathroom anxiety. Encourage drinking 8-12 ounces of water one hour before activity, sipping 4-6 ounces every 15-20 minutes during activity, and drinking 16-24 ounces after activity to replace losses. For practices or games lasting longer than one hour or in hot weather with heavy sweating, electrolyte replacement becomes important. Electrolytes—sodium, potassium, magnesium, calcium—are lost through sweat and must be replaced to prevent cramps, headaches, dizziness, and mood crashes.

Electrolyte powders or drinks can help, but read labels carefully. Many contain artificial dyes that some children react to behaviorally, high amounts of sugar that cause energy crashes, or caffeine that increases anxiety and heart rate. Choose products with minimal ingredients, natural flavors, and no added caffeine.

Warning: Check electrolyte product ingredients for allergens (soy, dairy), artificial dyes, and caffeine. Excessive sodium intake can be problematic for individuals with high blood pressure, kidney issues, or certain medications. Consult a physician or registered dietitian before using electrolyte supplements regularly, especially if your child takes medications for heart conditions, blood pressure, or ADHD.

Protein Intake for Muscle Repair and Energy

Protein supports muscle repair after exercise, provides sustained energy, helps with focus and mood regulation, and supports immune function. Many autistic children have restricted diets due to sensory sensitivities and may not consume adequate protein. Aim for protein at every meal and snack. Good sources include chicken, turkey, beef, fish, eggs (egg allergy warning), dairy products like cheese and yogurt (dairy allergy warning), beans, lentils, tofu (soy allergy warning), and nuts (nut allergy warning). For athletes with very limited diets, protein shakes or powders can supplement intake, but check ingredients carefully for allergens.

Warning: Protein powders often contain dairy (whey), soy, or tree nuts and may also include artificial sweeteners, added sugars, or stimulants. Always read labels and consult a physician or registered dietitian before adding protein supplements, especially for children under 12 years old.

Magnesium for Muscle Recovery and Sleep

Magnesium is a mineral that supports over 300 body processes including muscle relaxation, nerve function, and sleep regulation. Physical activity increases magnesium

needs, and deficiency is common. Signs of low magnesium include muscle cramps, restless legs, difficulty falling asleep, anxiety, and irritability. Some families find that magnesium supplementation helps with post-practice soreness, sleep quality, and overall calm. Magnesium glycinate is a well-absorbed form that is less likely to cause digestive upset compared to magnesium oxide. Topical magnesium can be applied as a lotion or added to baths as Epsom salt (magnesium sulfate). A warm Epsom salt bath after intense activity can reduce muscle soreness and promote relaxation.

Warning: Magnesium supplements can interact with antibiotics (tetracyclines, fluoroquinolones), blood pressure medications, muscle relaxants, and bisphosphonates. High doses can cause diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal cramping. Always consult your child's physician before starting magnesium supplements. Typical pediatric doses range from 100-400 mg daily depending on age and weight, but this must be individualized. Do not use Epsom salt baths if your child has open wounds, skin infections, or certain skin conditions.

Sleep as a Recovery Tool

Sleep is when the body repairs muscles, consolidates learning, regulates hormones, and restores the nervous system. Teens need 8-9 hours of sleep per night, but many get far less due to early school start times, homework, sports schedules, and screen time. Sleep deprivation mimics behavioral problems, worsens sensory overload, reduces athletic performance, increases injury risk, and impairs immune function. Prioritize sleep over extra practice sessions. Create a consistent bedtime routine: screen-free time one hour before bed, cool and dark room, white noise if helpful, and calming activities like reading or Epsom salt baths.

Warning: Chronic sleep deprivation in teen athletes increases risk of overuse injuries, illness, mood disorders, and burnout. If your teen consistently sleeps less than 7 hours per night, consult a physician. Sleep disorders like sleep apnea or restless leg syndrome are more common in autistic individuals and may require evaluation by a sleep specialist.

Recognizing Pain and Injury Signals

Autistic individuals may under-report pain (high pain tolerance or difficulty recognizing and communicating discomfort) or over-report pain (heightened sensitivity to certain sensations). Both create challenges in sports settings. Teach body awareness using pain scales with visual supports: faces showing pain levels from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain imaginable). Differentiate between normal soreness that occurs 24-48 hours after exercise and improves with movement, versus injury pain that is sharp, localized, persistent, and

worsens with activity. Check for visible signs after every practice: limping, favoring one side, swelling, bruising, or reluctance to move a body part.

Warning: Unrecognized injuries can worsen and lead to chronic problems or require surgery. If your child shows persistent pain, limping, or reluctance to use a limb for more than 2-3 days, consult a sports medicine physician or athletic trainer immediately. Do not allow your child to "play through" sharp pain or pain that interferes with normal movement.

Overtraining and Burnout Recognition

High-intensity athletics place demands on the body that require adequate recovery time. Overtraining occurs when training volume or intensity exceeds the body's ability to recover. Symptoms include persistent fatigue, declining performance despite continued training, frequent illness, trouble sleeping, increased resting heart rate, loss of appetite, irritability, anxiety, and loss of enjoyment in the sport. Autistic teens may be more vulnerable to overtraining because they may have difficulty recognizing body signals or may push through discomfort to meet expectations. Track sleep hours, subjective soreness levels, mood ratings, and performance metrics weekly. If symptoms persist for more than two weeks despite rest days, consult a sports medicine physician.

Warning: Overtraining syndrome can take months to resolve and may require complete cessation of training. It can lead to depression, eating disorders, and long-term health consequences. Rest and recovery are not signs of weakness—they are essential parts of athletic training. If your teen shows signs of overtraining, reduce training intensity immediately and consult a physician.

Stimulant Medications and Athletic Performance

Many autistic teens take stimulant medications for ADHD, such as methylphenidate or amphetamines. These medications affect heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, appetite, and hydration status during exercise. Stimulants can increase heart rate and blood pressure during physical activity, which is generally safe but requires monitoring. They can also suppress appetite, leading to inadequate calorie and fluid intake before and after practices. Some teens experience increased anxiety or overheating during exercise while on stimulants.

Communicate with prescribing physician about athletic participation. They may recommend monitoring heart rate during activity, adjusting medication timing, or providing guidance on hydration and nutrition. Always inform coaches and athletic trainers that your teen takes stimulant medication so they can watch for signs of overheating, dehydration, or cardiac distress.

Warning: Stimulant medications can increase risk of heat illness, dehydration, and cardiac events during intense exercise, particularly in hot weather. Ensure your teen drinks water consistently, eats adequate calories, and takes breaks in shade or air conditioning. If your teen experiences chest pain, dizziness, fainting, or rapid heartbeat during activity, stop immediately and seek medical attention. Do not allow participation in athletics without physician clearance if your teen has a heart condition or family history of sudden cardiac death.

Performance Supplements and Banned Substances

Some teens want to use supplements for performance enhancement, muscle building, or recovery, including protein powders, creatine, pre-workout drinks, amino acids, or testosterone boosters. Many supplements marketed to athletes are not regulated by the FDA, may contain hidden ingredients, allergens, or substances banned by high school athletic associations. Creatine, while researched in adults, has limited safety data in adolescents. Pre-workout supplements often contain high doses of caffeine, beta-alanine, or other stimulants that can cause anxiety, rapid heartbeat, insomnia, or dangerous interactions with ADHD medications.

Warning: Sports supplements are not FDA-regulated and may contain undisclosed ingredients including stimulants, steroids, or banned substances that can result in disqualification from high school sports. They can also contain common allergens like dairy, soy, nuts, or gluten. Many contain excessive caffeine that can cause anxiety, insomnia, rapid heartbeat, or dangerous interactions with psychiatric medications. Always consult your teen's physician and read ingredient labels carefully before using any supplement marketed for athletic performance. Natural does not mean safe.

Heat Illness Prevention

Autistic individuals may have difficulty recognizing thirst, overheating, or fatigue, which increases risk for heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Heat exhaustion symptoms include heavy sweating, weakness, dizziness, nausea, headache, and muscle cramps. Heat stroke is life-threatening and symptoms include confusion, lack of sweating despite heat, loss of consciousness, and body temperature above 104°F. Prevent heat illness by drinking water before feeling thirsty, wearing light-colored moisture-wicking clothing, taking frequent breaks in shade, and watching for early warning signs. Teach your teen to recognize when they feel overheated and to communicate immediately to coaches.

Warning: Heat stroke is a medical emergency requiring immediate 911 call and rapid cooling. If your child stops sweating in hot weather, becomes confused, dizzy, or loses consciousness, call 911 immediately and move them to shade while waiting for help.

Do not allow athletic participation in extreme heat (above 95°F) or high humidity without frequent mandatory water breaks and shade access.

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Sports and athletics carry inherent risks including physical injury, dehydration, heat illness, overtraining, cardiac events, and adverse reactions to foods or supplements. All nutritional changes, supplement use, training modifications, and medication adjustments require consultation with licensed healthcare professionals including physicians, sports medicine doctors, registered dietitians, and athletic trainers. Coaches are not medical professionals and cannot diagnose or treat medical conditions. Always communicate medical conditions, medications, allergies, and autism-related needs to coaches and athletic staff. Carry emergency medications such as EpiPens or inhalers if prescribed. Recognize signs of injury, heat illness, cardiac distress, and overtraining and seek immediate medical attention when needed. High school athletes with heart conditions or family history of sudden cardiac death require cardiac clearance from a cardiologist before sports participation.

By using this guide, you agree that SpectrumCareHub LLC bears no responsibility for outcomes and that you will consult qualified professionals for all health, nutritional, behavioral, and medical decisions specific to your child.

SpectrumCareHub - Science-grounded autism family support

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References:

Information in this guide was informed by research on sensory integration in autism and athletics, coaching strategies for autistic athletes, hydration needs in autistic individuals, and sports medicine principles. External sources consulted include peer-reviewed publications on autism and physical activity, Autism Speaks sports strategies, coaching

resources for athletes with neurodevelopmental differences, and hydration research specific to autism spectrum disorders.

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