

Healthy Athletes®: Transforming Athlete Care

Special Olympics is focused on achieving health equity for people with intellectual disabilities. Regular health assessments and follow-up care are essential for our athletes to live healthy lives.

Studies have shown that individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) typically receive substandard or virtually no care and die, on average, 16 to 20 years earlier than people without ID due to preventable health conditions. Special Olympics is leveling the playing field for people with ID to improve their health by making health inclusive and reducing health disparities to achieve health equity.

For nearly 30 years, Special Olympics Healthy Athletes® has provided free health screenings and education to Special Olympics athletes in a welcoming, fun environment. We have delivered millions of free health screenings and trained close to 300,000 health professionals and students to treat people with ID. These screenings help identify important health issues and improve the athletes' quality of life and health outcomes. They also provide an opportunity for healthcare students and professionals to increase knowledge of best practices in caring for and communicating with people with ID.

For every 10 athletes on a Special Olympics team:

- 2 have never had an eye exam
- 4 need a new prescription for glasses
- 2 have potential hearing loss
- 4 have untreated tooth decay, and 1–2 need urgent dental care
- 6 are overweight or obese and at risk for chronic health conditions
- 5 have problems with strength, and 6 have problems with flexibility, placing them at risk for injury



Healthy Athletes screenings are just the first step toward improving the health of our athletes, but follow-up care is equally as important for the long term, and while worldwide screenings are up, screenings in the United States are lagging.

To address this disparity, Special Olympics launched Healthy Athletes 2.0, which is training thousands more clinicians and students both online and in person to identify risk factors and serve more people with ID across the country. Special Olympics has also piloted a new electronic health records system, as well as a new mental health screening tool, to address the mental health needs of our athletes.

One Athlete's Transformative Health Journey

When Special Olympics athlete Melony Salla walks into a doctor's office, she wants to be treated like what she is: the expert on her own body. But for much of her life, that wasn't the case. Too often, doctors directed questions to her mom, even though Melony was the one experiencing the symptoms. "I live in this body, not my caregiver," she said. "I want to have the voice in it."

That frustration turned into motivation when Melony took on a leadership role that would connect her lived experience to real solutions: helping create a new website called 4ourhealth to make healthcare more inclusive for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID).

As the lead fellow on the project, Melony helped review content, guide videos, and ensure that everything on the website was accessible and easy to understand. "We made videos on what to expect at the doctor, like a chest exam," Melony explained. "We wanted it to be something anyone could understand, with or without a disability."

Today, the site features more than 40 videos covering everything from MRIs and dental visits to healthy habits and chronic condition management. Early feedback has athletes reporting feeling more prepared and confident before going to the doctor. For Melony, that's the true win. "Athletes tell me, 'This helped me know what to expect before going to the doctor,'" she said. "That's exactly the goal: confidence and independence."

Melony's journey from being spoken over in doctor's offices to shaping the way medical professionals are trained is proof of what happens when lived experience is placed at the center of change. For her, the message is simple but powerful: Inclusion isn't just about being present; it's about being heard. And now, because of her leadership, more people with ID will walk into appointments not just as patients but as partners in their own care.



"It's not just going to help people with disabilities—it's going to help everyone."

— Melony Salla

**If you or someone you know would like to volunteer
with Healthy Athletes, visit**

www.specialolympics.org/Volunteer