

Healthy Athletes®: Transforming Athlete Care

On the field, Special Olympics is focused on achieving health equity for people with intellectual disabilities. Getting regular health assessments and follow-up care is essential for our athletes to live healthy lives.

In 1997, Special Olympics Healthy Athletes® began offering free health screenings and education to Special Olympics athletes in a welcoming, fun environment. Since then, we have delivered over 2 million free health screenings and trained close to 300,000 health professionals and students to treat people with intellectual disabilities. These screenings not only help identify important health issues, but improve the athletes' quality of life and health outcomes.

After resuming in-person screenings in 2022, Special Olympics was able to complete more than 28,000 screenings internationally and nearly 28,000 screenings in the United States.

Healthy Athletes® screenings are a critical first step toward improving the health of our athletes, but follow-up care is equally important for the long term. However, the number of athletes receiving referrals and follow-up care in the United States lags behind Global Programs.

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 serve more people with intellectual disabilities across the country. Special Olympics is also piloting a new electronic health records system for state Programs to improve tracking, consistency, and efficiency of referrals at the local level. And, Special Olympics also recently piloted a completely new mental health screening tool to address the mental health needs of our athletes.

For every athlete on a Special Olympics team:

- 2** out of **10** athletes have never had an eye exam
- 4** out of **10** athletes need a new prescription for glasses
- 2** out of **10** athletes have potential hearing loss
- 4** out of **10** athletes have untreated tooth decay, and **1-2** are in need of urgent dental care
- 6** out of **10** athletes are overweight or obese and at risk for chronic health conditions
- 5** out of **10** athletes have problems with strength, and **6** have problems with flexibility, placing them at risk for injury



One Athlete's Transformative Health Journey

At his birth in China's Inner Mongolia in 1993, Xu Zhang was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and a clubfoot. By age seven, after receiving rehabilitation services in early childhood, he was able to walk but had an unstable gait, had difficulty using stairs, and always needed a companion when he went out.

At the age of 20, Xu began to play table tennis and participate in Special Olympics activities. A few years later, in 2016, Xu attended a competition in Nanjing where Healthy Athletes screenings were being offered as part of Special Olympics China's Healthy Communities work.

Fit Feet Clinical Director Lifei CAI diagnosed Xu with severe foot health issues, including a left clubfoot, right foot pronation, and leg length discrepancy, all of which give him a very unstable gait. With a referral from the Clinical Director, Xu received follow-up care at the China Rehabilitation Research Institute. After a detailed biomechanical evaluation, he received a pair of custom foot orthotics.

The Healthy Athletes® screening and follow-up treatment has been nothing short of life changing for Xu. He can now walk much more steadily, go out on his own, and no longer requires support going up and down the stairs. Periodically, Xu returns to the China Rehabilitation Research Institute for a review, adjustment, or reorder of the orthotics. Today, because of Special Olympics and the Healthy Athletes® screenings that are made possible by our supporters, Xu is able to walk with confidence.



Xu Zhang
Special Olympics Athlete



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

specialolympics.org/healthyathletes