Triathlon Participation by Children and Adolescents

Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness

ABSTRACT. Triathlon is a sport combining swimming, cycling, and running in one continuous event. It is a relatively new sport for children and adolescents, and participation is growing rapidly. The purpose of this statement is to provide pediatricians and others with information on the participation in triathlons by young athletes. A list of triathlon events is given in the "Resources" section at the end of this statement.

Triathlons specifically for children and adolescents began in 1985 with the formation of the Ironkids Bread Race Series. Participation is growing steadily. In 1994, a total of 18 events, 3 regional championships and 1 national championship, involving more than 5000 youth were held. Approximately 70% of the participants are boys, with increasing participation by girls. Although other independent triathlons for young athletes are held, the Ironkids events continue to be the only structured series. Distances required for the swimming, biking, and running components are relatively short, and there are two levels of participation based on age (Table). Athletes usually participate individually but can also join a three-person relay team.

Adolescents aged 15 to 19 years can compete at the Olympic distance in the junior category in events sanctioned by the sport's national governing body, Tri/Fed USA. The Junior National Team was started in 1991 for elite athletes in this age group. International competitions, including an annual world championship, are held. Ultradiantrall triathlons restrict participation to athletes 18 years or older. Adolescents also compete in sprint distance triathlons that are approximately half the Olympic distance and are the most popular triathlon distance.

No reports in the medical literature address the safety or injury characteristics of young athletes training for or participating in triathlons. In a previous statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics considered the risks of distance running for children and found no reason for restriction of activity.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that:

1. Triathlons for children and adolescents should be specifically designed for their participation, with emphasis on safety, fun, and fitness rather than competition. Currently available information indicates that triathlon participation is safe for young athletes.

2. Appropriate safety precautions for triathlons include, but are not limited to: 1) consideration of the need to shorten or cancel the event depending on the weather conditions (assessment of the risk of hypothermia or heat illness); 2) a pre-event swimming test, in which each participant is required to swim the event distance; 3) the presence of an appropriate number of lifeguards during the swimming portion; 4) swimming in pools with appropriate water temperature rather than in open water; 5) a bicycle course that is closed to motor vehicle use; 6) mandatory use of bicycle helmets; 7) provision of fluids during the running and bicycling parts of the race and at the end of the race; 8) a plan to deal with medical problems, including emergencies; and 9) medical screening before participation is allowed.

This statement has been approved by the Council on Child and Adolescent Health.

The recommendations in this statement do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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### TABLE. Triathlon Distance and Duration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Distance, Swim/Bike/Run</th>
<th>1994 Top Finish Times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironkids juniors (ages 7–10 y)</td>
<td>100 m/5 K/1 K</td>
<td>0:18:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironkids seniors (ages 11–15 y)</td>
<td>200 m/10 K/2 K</td>
<td>0:29:31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olympic distance Juniors (ages 15–19)</td>
<td>1500 m/40 K/10 K</td>
<td>2:04:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults (ages ≥20 y)</td>
<td>2.4 mi/112 mi/26.2 mi</td>
<td>8:20:27</td>
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</table>

† Tri/Fed USA National Amateur Championship, Columbia, MD, August 14, 1994.
‡ Ironman Triathlon World Championship, Kailua-Kona, HI, October 15, 1994.

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**REFERENCES**


**RESOURCES**

Gatorade Triathlon Series. Exclusive Sports Marketing, Inc, 1060 Holland Dr, Suite 3L, Boca Raton, FL 33427; (407) 241-3801

Ironman Mainland Office. World Triathlon Corporation, 1570 US Hwy 19N, Tarpon Springs, FL 34689; (813) 942-4767

Ironkids Bread Race Series. Campbell-Taggart, Inc, PO Box 1830, St Louis, MO 63118–0830; (314) 259–7279

Tri/Fed USA. National Office, 3595 E. Fountain Blvd, PO Box 1010, Colorado Springs, CO 80901; (719) 597–9090
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