

New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) released “multiple landmark recommendations” to its members on Monday

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SCOTCH PLAINS, NJ – With the widespread use of prescription medication abuse among high school athletes making waves across the country, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) released “multiple landmark recommendations” to its members on Monday.

The NJSIAA Medical Advisory Committee, which consists of administrators from member schools and medical/healthcare professionals, recommended nine protocol changes to combat the crisis.

“When it comes to our nation’s young people, this is about as serious as a problem can get,” Steve Timko, executive director of the NJSIAA, said. “Lives are being ruined – and in many cases ended – at an unprecedented rate. As an organization dedicated to the well-being of student-athletes, the NJSIAA is taking a proactive role in addressing what amounts to an outright crisis.”

Of the nine NJSIAA recommendations, seven have been directed towards physicians who treat student-athletes. According to the committee:

- Physicians should exercise extreme caution whenever considering opioid prescriptions for student-athletes.
- In terms of prescriptions, the first option should be such non-narcotic alternatives as acetaminophen, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, salicylates, and non-medication treatments like cryotherapy and transcutaneous electric nerve stimulation.
- If opioids are prescribed, it should only be for acute injuries resulting in severe pain – and only for one week at a time, with no automatic refills.
- All opioid prescriptions should be accompanied with detailed information on use, including specific warnings about abuse and addiction risks.
- Opioid prescriptions should never be given directly to student-athletes, and should never be administered in an unsupervised manner.
- Treating physicians and/or parents/guardians should notify the school nurse and/or athletic trainer about all opioid prescriptions.
- Treating physicians should utilize a “contract” – to establish boundaries and behaviors – whenever prescribing opioids to student athletes.
- Every school district needs to develop a specific, detailed policy addressing this issue.
- School districts should implement drug monitoring programs, with an emphasis on identifying

students who seem to exhibit signs of opioid abuse.

"I think this an apt and appropriate course of action. Opiate medication is terrifyingly addictive and as Mr. Timko said, has ruined many lives and families," said SPFHS athletic director Ryan Miller. "Similar to the steroid testing, this is again showing the foresight and caring that the NJSIAA has for student-athlete health and welfare."

Administrators at Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School have worked to create avenues of education and testing to prevent drug abuse of all kinds.

"An increasing number of students are undergoing surgeries to repair sports-related injuries. Often, the prescribed medication for pain relief is opiate-based," Miller added. "I think it is relatively easy to create a policy of asking parents to inform the school of the prescription, but the difficulty will lie in enforcing the policy."

According to the NJSIAA's press release, narcotic painkillers are the most commonly abused medications, including Vicodin, Percocet and OxyContin. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence said 12 percent of male student-athletes and 8 percent of female student-athletes have been given some form of an opioid class narcotic by a physician in the past year.

Other studies show that a large percentage of current heroin users began their addiction with opioid-based prescription drugs.

"Studies indicate that about 80 percent of heroin users started out by abusing narcotic painkillers," says advisory committee chair John P. Kripsak, D.O. "That statistic makes it frighteningly clear what the stakes are in this battle. It's an emergency now, and there's no doubt we need to implement new strategies in our schools to turn the tide."

Additional details on the prescription drug epidemic are available online at www.state.nj.us/sci/pdf/PillsReport.pdf, in the form of a New Jersey State Commission of Investigation report.