

Hormonal IUDs and RED-S

Menstrual health is crucial for athletic performance, but hormonal IUDs can alter menstrual patterns, making it difficult for us to assess our health. VIS Expert Chimsom Oleka, MD, discusses the impact of hormonal IUDs and shares insights on recognizing signs of Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports (RED-S).

For many women, having a consistent period is seen as a sign of good health. As women athletes, in particular, we rely on our menstrual cycles to gauge how well our bodies are responding to training and whether we are getting adequate nutrition. But hormonal IUDs can alter periods, making it challenging for those of us with these IUDs to monitor our health without a regular cycle.

We spoke with VIS Expert Chimsom Oleka, MD, to discuss what a hormonal IUD is, how it changes your period, and how to look for signs of Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports (RED-S) without your period as a biomarker.

Hormonal IUDs and Their Effects on Health and Performance

A [hormonal IUD](#) (intrauterine device) is a small, T-shaped device a healthcare provider inserts into the vagina to prevent pregnancy. The IUD releases tiny amounts of progestin—a synthetic hormone—into the body. Progestin makes it difficult for sperm to find an egg and fertilize it, therefore limiting pregnancy.

Hormonal IUDs typically lead to lighter and shorter periods. For many, monthly bleeding disappears entirely. This happens because the progestin hormone stops the thickening of the uterine lining. Normally, periods occur when the uterus sheds its lining after thickening, but if the lining doesn't thicken at all, there is nothing to shed.

According to Oleka, per current research, hormonal IUDs do not negatively impact performance. In fact, they can enhance menstrual health and performance by reducing the frequency and volume of bleeding, which improves iron stores.

“If menstrual dysfunction is present (heavy menses or painful periods, specifically) the IUD can help manage those symptoms, which could lead to an improvement in athletic performance if those symptoms were disruptive,” Oleka says.

IUDs are also low maintenance. Athletes don't have to worry about taking medicine at a certain time like they do with oral contraceptives. With an IUD, athletes have one less worry amidst frequent travel and timezone changes.

Recognizing and Managing Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports (RED-S)

[Relative energy deficiency in sports \(RED-S\)](#) occurs when athletes do not eat enough food to support their energy demands of their daily lives and training. Over time, if an athlete continues to train hard without refueling, their amount of available energy decreases, which drastically impacts athletic performance and overall health. If left untreated, RED-S can disrupt menstruation, increase the risk of stress fractures and osteoporosis, compromise immunity, slow metabolism, negatively affect cardiovascular health, and lead to psychological issues such as moodiness, depression, and anxiety.

Tracking duration, flow, and quality of periods is a common way healthcare providers diagnose RED-S. But when athletes use hormonal IUDs, they may not have a period and might need to be diagnosed based on other factors. According to Oleka, other symptoms of RED-S include brain fog, trouble concentrating, poor sleep quality, recurrent bone stress injuries or slow healing injuries, declining performance despite adequate training, hitting a plateau, slower recovery, persistent fatigue, or low energy.

Oleka also emphasizes that even if an athlete uses a hormonal IUD, they should not ignore changes in bleeding or menstrual pattern. Whether on or off hormonal therapy, subtle changes can still point toward underfueling. In addition, RED-S is a diagnosis of exclusion, which means that doctors make this diagnosis only after they have ruled out other possible health problems that could cause similar symptoms. This is important because it helps ensure that athletes get thorough check-ups to determine whether their issues are actually caused by RED-S, rather than other conditions like anemia or hormonal imbalances, which can also affect how well they perform and their overall health.

Supporting Athletes with Hormonal IUDs

Per Oleka, training plans do not need to be specifically adjusted for athletes who use hormonal IUDs. Oleka said that one of the most common potential side effects is unscheduled or unpredictable bleeding, so athletes should be prepared for that.

"Keep a period kit (a bag that has all essentials you would need to be prepared for a pop up bleed)," Oleka says. "Also, invest in some period underwear. These can be very helpful, especially for unpredictable spotting/bleeding or not being able to change period products as often as desired."

Oleka also suggests that athletes work with a Sports Nutritionist to adjust for varying phases of practice intensity. By addressing nutrition early and consistently, athletes decrease their overall risk for RED-S. In addition, Oleka encourages athletes to educate themselves about menstrual

health and hormonal contraception. She recommends resources from the [American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists](#), [Young Women's Health](#), [Bedsider](#), and [The Sports Gynecologist](#) via Instagram.

Overall, Oleka said that hormonal IUDs can be a great option for busy athletes that are looking for something effective yet low maintenance.

“Choose the option that you are going to feel the most comfortable with, has a bleeding profile that makes sense with your lifestyle and fulfills (to the best of its ability) the needs you have (helps with period pain, decreases bleeding, contraception, etc),” Oleka said.