

# Middle-Aged Triathletes Need to Check Their Heart Health



By Erik Lief — May 13, 2016



Triathlon cyclist via

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I've always been fascinated by those who have the desire and drive to become a triathlete. Namely, what motivates them to push their bodies to extreme levels, and not only in just one sport -- but in three sports consecutively: swimming, biking and running. Even though I've been athletic my entire life and fully enjoyed the sports in which I've participated, I really am in awe of those who can compete in these grueling races.

That is, until I hear about people dropping dead during competition.

I have a handful of friends who are triathletes, and they're middle-aged, so I am silently and continuously hoping that no horrific episode befalls them. But when I read about a study showing that when middle-aged triathletes die it's during the swimming portion of the event, it makes me want to take a closer look to see what's behind those sobering statistics. And my interest increases even more after learning that triathlon participation has been sharply increasing since the beginning of the century, which undoubtedly means that fatalities will rise as well -- unless precautions are taken.

Apparently, the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation beat me to the punch, because in late March it [published a study](#) [2] looking into triathlon-related fatalities. Researchers found that in the three decades between 1985 and 2015, 109 sudden deaths occurred during events held by USA Triathlon, the governing body of the sport. Of that number, "85 percent of them were men. The average age of the entire group was 47, and in a closer look at recent deaths (2006-15), the average age was 50, or 12 years older than the average age of all participants during that time," [as reported by ESPN](#) [3].



Triathlon swimmers vis

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And even more alarming (at least for me), of those 109 fatalities, the study found that 72 of them -- or 66 percent -- happened during the aquatic leg of the race. That's a stunning statistic, made more so given that triathlon participation in the United States has been undergoing explosive growth.

In 1999, USA Triathlon's membership was 127,824; by 2012 it had reached a record-high of 510,859 -- an increase of roughly 400 percent -- [according to figures on its website](#). [4] Today the body's membership stands at 477,000.

Now, from all these statistics, a picture seems to emerge: middle-aged men (or soon-to-be middle-age men as the overall population ages), appear to be most at risk and especially while swimming. And the underlying cause, according to the findings, has to do with deficiencies in heart health.

"Approximately half of the deaths occur during the short triathlons, which is the distance with the most participants," the study noted. "Cardiovascular disease played a larger role in the other deaths; of the 41 victims who underwent autopsies, 55 [percent] of them were found to have evidence of cardiovascular disease that either caused or contributed to the death.

"These findings provide an enhanced understanding of the potential cardiovascular risks for some participants of triathlons," said Dr. Kevin Harris, the study's lead researcher. "We have learned that middle-aged males comprise the vast majority of victims and usually during the swim."

What this all means, of course, is that a word of caution is in order.

No one is advocating that racers abandon the triathlon. But peering into this sport reinforces the reality that it's a very strenuous activity, and that participants should make sure that they're in good enough shape before entering the race. Obviously, this means checking with your doctor before hand -- especially important for middle-aged men -- to see if your heart is up for the grueling task.

The bottom line is that the number of fatalities over 30 years, as compared to the high number of participants, is very small. But those who want to take on this physical challenge should first exercise caution prior to the race, to ensure they eventually make it to the finish line in gratifying fashion.

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[2] <http://mplsheart.org/news-event/cardiovascular-risk-triathlon-participation-expanded-profile/>

[3] [http://espn.go.com/sports/endurance/story/\\_/id/15139696/middle-aged-male-participants-need-health-screening](http://espn.go.com/sports/endurance/story/_/id/15139696/middle-aged-male-participants-need-health-screening)

[4] <https://www.teamusa.org/usa-triathlon/about/multisport/demographics>