

GAA Cardiac Health Position Paper Draft

GAA Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee

2026

Summary

The GAA's Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee has updated its Cardiac Health position paper in early 2026 following an extensive consultation process. The previous position was published in 2010 and therefore the committee believed it was both timely and necessary to refresh its position to ensure it remains aligned with current evidence, contemporary practice and the needs of its members. The 2026 position expands the focus to include behavioural factors and emergency readiness in addition to screening. Its chief objectives in so doing were -

- To continue to promote player and member safety and wellbeing by advising on best practices to reduce the risk and impact of cardiac events and to promote positive cardiac health.
- To produce an updated position which can be used across the Association, regardless of level or grade.
- To educate and engage with its membership by raising awareness among players, parents, coaches, officials and other volunteers about signs, symptoms and risk reduction strategies.

The consultation process — involving engagement with recognised subject matter experts, medical professionals, and partner organisations in cardiac health and emergency response — was undertaken with the following objectives –

- To ensure evidence-based guidance development
- To benchmark the GAA's approach against international standards
- To foster alignment and collaboration with key stakeholders
- To identify challenges and opportunities within current guidance

In summary, the GAA's updated position is that cardiac health must encompass lifelong education, healthy lifestyle choices and preparedness to act in an emergency. This integrated approach ensures that every member – from juvenile players to senior inter-county – is supported and can proactively manage risk. This is a guidance document and does not represent a clinical standard of care.

Guidance

The GAA advocates for a holistic and proactive approach to cardiac health for all its members, grounded in risk reduction, education, and emergency preparedness. To this end, the following is recommended for members (Cardiac Health Information Hub - <https://learning.gaa.ie/cardiachealth>) –

Lifestyle and Long-Term Cardiac Wellbeing

The GAA's Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee recommends a continued emphasis on good nutrition choices, appropriate physical training, stress management, and other positive lifestyle behaviours in the context of maintaining positive cardiac health.

The GAA has produced, and continues to update, educational resources and support programmes which help to promote everyday heart health. Examples of these can be found below, and it is recommended that all members familiarise themselves with these

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- <https://learning.gaa.ie/fuelyourgame> - “Fuel Your Game – Healthy Eating for Sport”
- <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/healthy-eating> - Healthy Eating in the GAA
- <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/substance-use-gambling-awareness/smoke-free-clubs> - Smoke and Vape-Free
- <https://learning.gaa.ie/TrainingandLifestyle> - GAA Training & Lifestyle Resources
- [Club Substance Use Policy V12.24.pdf](#) - GAA Substance Use Policy
- <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/mental-fitness/mental-health-charter> - GAA Mental Health Charter
- <https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/> - HSE Mental Health Support
- <https://www.samaritans.org/ireland/samaritans-ireland/> - Samaritans Support

- <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/mental-fitness> - GAA Mental Fitness
- <https://learning.gaa.ie/healthyclub> - Irish Life GAA Healthy Clubs Programme
- <https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/community-and-health/community-personal-development/cirp-training> - GAA Critical Incident Response Plan

Emergency Readiness

Recognising that cardiac incidents can still occur despite best preventative measures, the GAA places equal priority on rapid response capability.

This includes –

- Affiliation with the Irish Heart Foundation as an Affiliated Training Site
- Rollout of a new Gaelic Games First Aid Course, inclusive of Irish Heart Foundation Heartsaver Training (this course remains in its pilot phase and will be made available on a case-by-case basis, subject to demand, from 2026 onward. Further information will be made available here - <https://learning.gaa.ie/firstaid>)
- Availability of specific Automated External Defibrillator (AED) Guidance, including details around maintenance - <https://learning.gaa.ie/gaadefibrillators>
- Recommendation that every defibrillator is registered with the National Ambulance Service. This is a vital component to increase the chances of survival when a cardiac arrest occurs, because it helps emergency services to locate the nearest AED to an incident.

The key areas of focus when it comes to GAA Units and AEDs are as follows –

- 1. Acquisition**
- 2. Accessibility and Storage**
- 3. Maintenance**
- 4. Training**
- 5. Registering with the National Ambulance Service**

1. Acquisition

- The GAA does not recommend one AED model over another. There are several suppliers of AEDs, but since 2005, Heart Safety Solutions has offered GAA Clubs the opportunity to purchase AEDs at a reduced price as part of the Association's Defibrillator Scheme.
- Clubs can purchase AEDs directly through Heart Safety Solutions at special rates by contacting info@hearts.ie or dave@hearts.ie.
- In cases where clubs train and play home matches in separate venues, Clubs should strongly consider an AED being available at both venues.

2. Accessibility and Storage

- Clubs with large facilities may require more than one AED to ensure an AED can reach a victim of SCD within **3 minutes**.
- Performance of the defibrillator may be compromised if the manufacturer's recommendations are not adhered to.
- To avoid difficulties accessing an AED in the event of an emergency it is advised that the AED should not be kept under lock and key.
- Appropriate signage should be in place to illustrate its position and facilitate quick access, particularly if the AED is kept indoors or in an obscure location.

3. Maintenance

- The ACT campaign was launched by the GAA/GPA in partnership with Heart Safety Solutions with the aim of encouraging clubs to ensure that their defibrillators were in full working order.

- Representing three simple steps which could save someone's life, the campaign calls for clubs with AEDs or those considering an upgrade to 'A', ensure that the defibrillator is Accessible, 'C' make sure it is Charged and 'T' that people are Trained how to use it.
- **Accessible** – make sure that your defibrillator is stored in an area where ACCESS is not restricted, remember minutes are critical. Specialised units are available for outdoor storage.
- **Charged** – Ensure that your defibrillator is fully CHARGED (**check battery status**) and that self-tests have been passed by carrying out weekly inspections. Ensure that your battery and pads (pad-packs) have not reached their expiry date. The checklist provided can assist weekly inspections.
- **Trained** – Ensure there are enough TRAINED rescuers to respond anytime the clubhouse or pitches are occupied, this includes training sessions as well as matches.

4. Training

- The Gaelic Games' First Aid Course, through its affiliation with the Irish Heart Foundation, delivers the IHF Heartsaver Course, which covers CPR and AED training. This will be made available to members in 2026 on a phased basis.
- It's important to note you don't have to be trained to use an AED, when operating one, they instruct the user through each step of usage, but of course it is preferable to be trained.
- Counties/Clubs in hosting training can decide on whether they want to engage with a particular supplier or not. There are many companies that deliver AED training for large groups.
- Training is also available through a national network of training organisations, affiliated to the Irish Heart Foundation. Contact the IHF at

www.irishheart.ie for information and the British Heart Foundation (6 counties). Contact BHF at www.bhf.org.uk.

- Community First Responders – use the below link to find a list of groups in your county. These groups can provide information on AED training - <https://becomeacfr.ie/cfr-schemes-map/>
- It's important to organise AED training with an accredited and recognised body the above organisations can provide appropriate guidance.

5. Registering with the National Ambulance Service (<https://becomeacfr.ie/aed/>)

- Every year in Ireland, unfortunately, thousands of people suffer a cardiac arrest. Early CPR and defibrillation with an AED can double their chances of survival. Knowing where the nearest AED is located can make all the difference when every second counts.
- There are an estimated 9,000 AEDS across Ireland. Unfortunately, many are never used because emergency services don't know where they are or how to access them. It is estimated that only around half of AEDs are registered to the National Ambulance Service's AED network.
- Devices registered to this network provide the NAS with vital information – because once an AED is registered here, emergency services can direct bystanders to their nearest AED and therefore increase a person's chance of survival. You can register your club's AED via the National Ambulance Service website here – https://surveys.hse.ie/s/AED_Form/

Cardiac Screening

As an additional method to identify potential risk, the GAA, through its Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee, recommends the following in respect of Cardiac Screening -

The most effective way to identify potential risk for players over the age of 14 is to undergo cardiac screening on one occasion. It is also advised that this process be repeated before the age of 25.

This process involves the completion of the GAA cardiac health questionnaire (available here - <https://learning.gaa.ie/cardiachealth>), an ECG (electrocardiogram), and a physical examination conducted by a suitably qualified medical professional.

Players should contact their doctor if any symptoms listed in the questionnaire, or advised by their doctor, present in the future.

Of all the cardiac screening tools, one of the best predictors of sudden death risk is a positive questionnaire.

The following should be borne in mind in the context of cardiac screening -

- Testing should be done in a centre where ECGs/ECHOs are being reported by experienced sports cardiologists
- There is a significant percentage that will have an abnormality which may require further evaluation
- A small percentage may end up uncertain as to whether it is safe for them to participate or not
- A negative screening result does not always exclude an underlying cardiac condition

Players should consult their team or family doctor if they wish to avail of further screening services.

The GAA does offer an option of a second opinion on abnormal ECGs on a case-by-case basis from a subject matter expert. The player's GP or consultant should outline the context and any specific queries they have as part of this request.

Please contact GAA Player Welfare Manager Eoghan Tuohey for further information in this regard – eoghan.tuohey@gaa.ie or Tel. 01-8192923.