



Quick facts about the differences between the Paralympics & Special Olympics

Misconceptions around the Olympics, the Paralympics and Special Olympics have existed for a long time. Confusion particularly around Special Olympics and Paralympics is quite common, so we wanted to help break a few things down for you.

Quick facts

Paralympics

- The Paralympics refers to the Paralympic Games, a multi-sport event that happens every 4-years (in both Summer and Winter cycles)
- The Paralympics are held in parallel with the Olympic Games (hence “para”) (usually about two weeks after).
- There are currently [28 Summer Sports](#) included in the Paralympic program for Tokyo 2020
- The Paralympics have specific rules around eligibility and classification for athletes based on 10 eligible impairment types. Learn more about [classification here](#).
- The following impairment types are eligible to compete at the Paralympic Games:
 - Vision Impairments
 - Intellectual Impairments
 - Physical Impairments
 - Impaired muscle power
 - Impaired passive range of movement
 - Limb deficiency
 - Leg length difference
 - Short Stature
 - Muscle tension
 - Uncoordinated movements (ataxia)
 - Involuntary movements (athetosis)
- Athletes must qualify and meet specific selection criteria to attend and compete at the Paralympic Games
- Athletes with disabilities who participate in para sports are Para athletes, but you are not a Paralympian until you compete at the Paralympic Games (similarly not every athlete is considered an Olympian)



Quick facts

Special Olympics

- Special Olympics refers to an organization and sport system, not a single event.
- Participating athletes have an intellectual disability
- Variety of different events at the local, regional, provincial/territorial, national and world level.
- 29 Summer Sports, 10 of which are offered in Canada
- The mandate of Special Olympics is to provide sports programs for people with intellectual disabilities. Recreational and competitive programs are available for athletes of all ages and abilities, and there is a specific pathway and criteria in Canada for those athletes interested in training for and competing at National and World Games. Athletes must qualify through Provincial/Territorial Games or qualifying events in order to be eligible for National Games, which are held every 4 years (in both Summer and Winter cycles).
- The Special Olympics World Games is a multi-sport event that happens every 4-years (in both Summer and Winter cycles)
- Special Olympics uses divisioning (as opposed to classification) and groups athletes based on age, gender and ability and do not exclude based on performance. (i.e. distance, times, etc.). In Canada, divisioning is only based on gender and ability.

Did You Know?

Athletes with an Intellectual Impairment can participate in Athletics in the Para sport stream and in the Special Olympics stream.

In Para Athletics, athletes are most often referred to as athletes with an intellectual impairment whereas in Special Olympics, the term intellectual disability is used.

Athletes with an Intellectual Impairment must meet specific eligibility requirements and be classified in order to compete in the Paralympic pathway and at Paralympic Games. These same requirements are not required with Special Olympics.

Athletics clubs in Canada are open to supporting athletes within either stream and help guide athletes and their parents/guardians on the best competitive pathway for each individual.