

HEADING THE BALL: INFORMATION FOR ELITE FOOTBALL PLAYERS

There is increasing concern that football players are at high risk of brain injuries and diseases as a result of years of heading the ball during training and matches. Youth footballers in Scotland are now banned from heading the ball but, as older adult players are past that stage, we need to give you the relevant information so you know the risks and dangers involved in football heading. Three brain injuries and diseases linked to heading are listed to the right.

Concussion

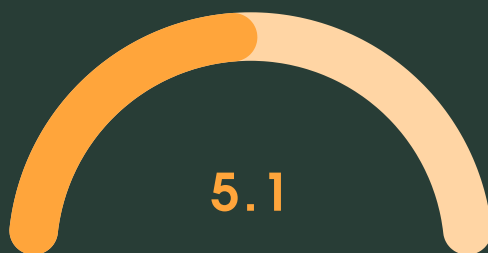
- An injury that shows immediate symptoms of traumatic brain injury

Dementia

- A disease which stops brain cells in some areas from working properly, affecting memory, thinking and speaking

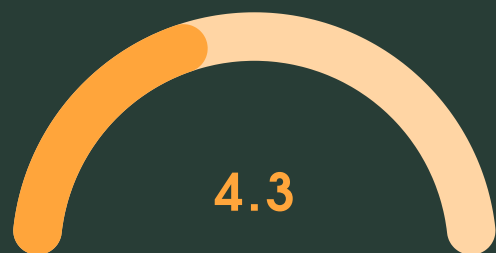
Motor Neurone Disease

- A group of diseases which affects motor nerves and may mean loss in the ability to walk, talk, eat, drink and breathe unaided



DEMENTIA

Professional football players are 5.1 times more likely to die from a form of Dementia than the general population, due to increased risk of brain injury from exposure to repeated heading impacts



MOTOR NEURONE DISEASE

Instances of contracting Motor Neurone Disease are 4.3 times higher in professional footballers than in the general population. Symptoms include muscle weakness, slurred speech and difficulty swallowing



Heading increases concussion symptoms and decreases working memory

Evidence shows that repeated heading of the ball results in immediate decline in memory, increased concussion symptoms, and decreased ability to carry out simple tasks. This finding is important not just on the pitch, but also in your daily life.

"I believe the facts will show in time there is a direct correlation between the number of times they headed the ball and dementia"

46%

OF ENGLAND'S 1966 WORLD CUP WINNING SQUAD HAVE DEVELOPED DEMENTIA. THIS IS COMPARED WITH 5-8% OF THE GENERAL POPULATION.



John Stiles, son of 1966 World Cup winner Nobby Stiles, is adamant that repeated heading of the ball is dangerous. John lost his father in October 2020 after a battle with dementia that lasted over two decades.



While overall risk of brain injury and disease is increased for professional football players compared to the general population, there is no increased risk found for goalkeepers.

Risk is high across all outfield positions, and highest amongst defenders, who are over 5 times more likely to get a brain injury or disease than the general population.



UEFA EURO 2020 HEADED GOALS

Despite knowledge of risk factors associated with heading the ball, almost 1 in 5 goals at UEFA EURO 2020 were scored with the head.

"Is heading absolutely necessary to the game of football? Is potential exposure to degenerative brain disease absolutely necessary?"



Dr Willie Stewart from the University of Glasgow is a leading researcher in the link between heading in football and brain injury and disease. He believes that heading should be eliminated from football altogether.

How can you lower the risk of brain injury and disease?

Reduce the amount of long goal kicks

The most common scenario where players jump for headers is from long goal kicks. Replacing these with throws or ground passes would dramatically decrease the number of times players are using their head to play the ball.

Introduce a maximum number of headers

Each player would be responsible for lowering their own risk of brain injury and disease by ensuring they keep their number of headers per session as low as they can, and not over the maximum limit set by their coaching staff.

Be cautious, mitigate risk, look after the whole team.

