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02/15/2017 01:46:05 PM

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A potential link between dementia and heading a football has been confirmed by a group of retired footballers for the first time. Scientists say the results prove more research is urgently needed to look at the risk to players and allow measures to be put in place to protect them from long-term damage. Olivia Kinsley has the details.

Jeff Astle was, to many, a legend. The star England striker who scored 174 league goals. But he died with dementia so severe, he didn't even know he'd ever been a footballer. His family have always believed it was caused by brain damage from heading footballs. Now there is the first tentative evidence of a scientific link. It broke my heart, because everything he had one in football, football had in effect taken away from him with this dreadful illness. He knew nothing at all about anything. He used to sit in his own little world towards the end. Researchers at UCL studied the brains of 14 former players and found that 6 of them had suffered from membrane tears which have been linked with repetitive brain trauma. They had all been playing football for an average of 26 years,

beginning from when they were children or teenagers. Throughout their 20 year or so career, they would have headed the ball thousands of times. But other than that, footballers are also exposed to other head impacts as well, including head collisions, head to player, head to trunk, head to goalpost or head to ground, so these are also repetitive head impacts. The football Association have welcomed the study and say they hope it will lead to more detailed research. The scientists involved say they will next aim for a larger study and more solid evidence that dementia among footballers is caused by heading balls.