WARNING FOR FOOTBALLERS: Heading ball over years 'can result in development of dementia'

A LINK between brain damage and dementia in a group of retired footballers has been established for the first time, scientists have said.

PUBLISHED: 00:01, Wed, Feb 15, 2017

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/fb.png |  | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/tw.png |  | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/g-plus.png |  | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/m.png |  | | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/sh.png |  | | **1** | | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | |  | http://cdn.images.express.co.uk/img/static/comments/newshare/c.png |  | | **6** | |

The new research has raised fresh concerns about the long-term effects of repeatedly heading footballs.

The study looked at 14 former players renowned for their ball heading skills and who played football for an average of 26 years.

The players - who included 13 professionals - were studied over a 30 year period. All began to show signs of memory and thinking problems from an average age of 63 and ended up suffering dementia.

The brains of six of the retired players, none of whom have been identified, underwent post-mortem examinations.

All six players were found to have Alzheimer’s and four suffered chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) - a progressive degenerative disease found in athletes with a history of repetitive brain trauma.

The devastating condition (CTE) has previously been linked with boxing and American football.

Consultant psychiatrist Dr Don Williams launched the study after being approached by a man whose footballer father had been diagnosed with dementia, and who wanted to know if headers could be the cause.

He said: “As a result I looked out for men with dementia and a significant history of playing soccer, followed them up and where possible arranged for post-mortem studies to be carried out.

“The results suggest that heading the ball over many years, a form of repetitive sub-concussive head injury, can result in the development of CTE and dementia.

“Thus the original suggestion has been shown to be of merit and worthy of further investigation.”

Concerns were first raised following the death of former England and West Brom striker Jeff Astle, aged just 59, in 2002.

He was found to have CTE which a coroner ruled was caused by heading old fashioned heavy leather balls.

Early signs of Dementia

A charity set up by Mr Astle’s family later warned that more than 300 former professional footballers have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and thousands more may have brain damage.

Last year it was revealed that three members of England’s 1966 World Cup winning team - Martin Peters, Ray Wilson and Nobby Stiles - have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, while Jack Charlton also told how he suffers from severe memory loss.

The new study, which is published today in the journal Acta Neuropathologica, was carried out between 1980 and 2010 - during which time the players regularly met with researchers.

The players - who have all since died - had been referred to the Old Age Psychiatry Service in Swansea, Wales.

The rate of CTE detected in the brains of the players was greater than the 12 per cent average found in a previous study which looked at 268 brains from the general population.

Like Alzheimer’s disease, CTE is characterised by a build-up of abnormal tau protein in the brain.

Study lead author Dr Helen Ling, of the Institute of Neurology at University College London, said: “This is the first time CTE has been confirmed in a group of retired footballers.

“Our findings of CTE in retired footballers suggest a potential link between playing football and the development of degenerative brain pathologies in later life.

“However, it is important to note that we only studied a small number of retired footballers with dementia and that we still do not know how common dementia is among footballers.”

Last night experts said more research is urgently needed to assess risks faced by players and allow measures to be put in place to protect footballers from long-term damage.

Dr David Reynolds, chief scientific officer at Alzheimer’s Research UK, said: “Links between head injury and dementia are just beginning to be explored in more detail and this study showing evidence of CTE in a small number of retired football players, highlights the need for further research.

“Long-term studies following large groups of people with appropriate controls are needed to better understand any links between playing football and dementia.

“The causes of dementia are complex and it is likely that the condition is caused by a combination of age, lifestyle and genetic factors.

"Further research is needed to shed light on how lifestyle factors such as playing sport may alter dementia risk, and how this sits in the context of the well-established benefits of being physically active.”

Dr James Pickett, head of research at Alzheimer’s Society said: “This research broadens an important area of investigation into sports-related head injuries and dementia, that has caused much recent speculation.

“However, these results do not provide proof that heading a football, or sustaining a head injury by any other means during the sport, is linked to developing dementia.

“It is good to see long term studies that take medical data such as reported concussions into account, but the study lacks important genetic and lifestyle information for the people involved.

“We know that these factors play a big role in influencing a person’s risk of dementia and so need to be accounted for when understanding how the condition has developed.”

Last night Jeff Astle’s daughter Dawn spoke of her frustration that there has not been more research carried out in the years since her father’s death, and criticised a lack of action by footballing authorities as “indefensible and disgraceful”.

She said: “The evidence is mounting. It is sad to read - I am not surprised, it doesn’t shock me at all.

“It’s too late for dad. The research is so important for current players and for future players. That’s why we need it.

"I think that’s what is so very frustrating - the fact that it’s nearly 15 years since my dad died. And the fact that nothing from any footballing authorities has been done.

“It is really indefensible and disgraceful. It really is. This isn’t an arthritis or a bruised leg or a broken leg. People are dying. This is killing people.”

The Football Association is yet to commission research into heading because its “expert concussion panel” wants to ensure the terms of reference are correct.