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**Heading a football repeatedly 'could lead to dementia'**

* [**MARK CHANDLER**](http://www.standard.co.uk/author/mark-chandler)
* Wednesday 15 February 2017 08:20 GMT

**Repeated heading of a**[**football**](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/football)**by professional players during their career could lead to**[**dementia**](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/dementia)**, a study claims.**

A post-mortem examination of the brains of six retired footballers by [University College London](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/ucl) (UCL) and Cardiff University showed all of them had signs of Alzheimer’s disease.

Four of those six had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) pathology, a condition which can lead to dementia and which scientists said was “probably related” to repetitive head impacts from collisions and heading footballs during their careers.

The six players were part of a wider study of 14 retired players over three decades, all skilled headers of the ball who suffered from dementia.

However, Professor Huw Morris from the UCL Institute of Neurology said more research to establish a definitive link and stressed any risk to people playing football in their spare time was low.

He said: “We do not yet know exactly what causes CTE in footballers or how significant the risk is.

"Major head injuries in football are more commonly caused by player collisions rather than heading the ball.

"The average footballer heads the ball thousands of times throughout their career, but this seldom causes noticeable neurological symptoms."

The [FA](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/fa) has said it will look closely at the research, published in the journal Acta Neuropathologica.

But Dawn Astle, the daughter of former [England](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/england) and [West Brom](http://www.standard.co.uk/topic/west-brom) striker Jeff Astle who died from a degenerative brain disease in 2002, said a lack of action by authorities earlier was “indefensible”.

Astle played for West Brom between 1964 and 1974 and his family have campaigned about the damage caused by heading the heavy leather footballs of the past.

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."

According to the study, the rate of CTE detected in the footballers' brains was greater than the 12 per cent average found in a previous study which looked at 268 brains from the general population.

The ex-players involved in the study all began playing football and heading the ball when they were children or teenagers and continued for an average of 26 years.

They were all referred to the Old Age Psychiatry Service in Swansea between 1980 and 2010.

Urging caution over the findings, Dr Helen Ling, lead author of the UCL Queen Square Brain Bank study, said: "Previous studies have shown that the risk of Alzheimer's disease is increased in people with previous head injuries.

"On the other hand, the risk of dementia is also increased with age and we don't know if these footballers would have developed Alzheimer's disease anyway if they hadn't played football.

"The most pressing research question is therefore to find out if dementia is more common in footballers than in the normal population."

The FA's head of medicine, Dr Charlotte Cowie, said: "We welcome this research and the new study is the result of a very dedicated group of researchers working hard to develop further understanding in this area.

"The Football Association takes the concerns around concussion and head injuries extremely seriously.”

*Additional reporting by the Press Association.*