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**Foul mouthed: why are footballers’ teeth so bad?**

Dentists who examined 187 professionals from Premier League and Football League clubs have revealed that many players have poor oral health. Is there a root cause?

Their bodies are young and fit, their diet is controlled by experts, they have the best medical care in the world, lots of spare time and they are rich beyond imagining, yet a professional footballer’s teeth are, on average, in worse shape than yours or mine. It’s hard to believe, but it seems to be a fact.

As part of [a study just published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine](http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/early/2015/10/01/bjsports-2015-094953.full#ref-1), club dentists examined virtually all the senior players at Hull City, Manchester United, Southampton, Swansea City, West Ham United, Brighton and Hove Albion, Cardiff City and Sheffield United – 187 players in total. They found that 37% had “active dental caries [cavities]”; 77% had at least one filling (and, on average, five); 53% showed “dental erosion”; 77% had gingivitis covering at least half their mouths; 5% had “moderate-severe irreversible periodontal [gum and jaw] disease”; and 45% were actively “bothered” by their oral health. A fifth of players said the problems reduced their overall quality of life, and 7% said it affected their training or performance. “Oral health of professional footballers is poor,” the report concluded, putting it mildly.

How could this be? Modern football clubs are understandably obsessed with the health of their players. On arriving at Arsenal, Arsène Wenger famously [decreed that the whole squad should get their teeth checked](http://www.theguardian.com/football/2003/aug/19/sport.biography). [Robin van Persie](http://www.sport.co.uk/football/van-persie-follows-gerrard-and-malouda-wisdom-in-dental-stakes/20730#EuWZ1Pm5MbGS0my9.97) and others have at times put their injury problems down to their dental health. How could such preventable diseases still be rife?

One possible culprit considered by the study was sugary sports drinks, which nearly two-thirds of the players said they consumed at least three times a week. No actual correlation between consumption of sports drinks and tooth decay was found, however. Besides, with the right dental regime, it’s not even clear that sports drinks necessarily harm your teeth.

Another possibility is that footballers, especially those who grew up in the developing world, may have had poor access to dental care and education as children. Yet everyone who participated in the study was over 18, so virtually all of them will have been wealthy – and living in a wealthy country – for at least a few years. Moreover, the players’ oral health got worse as they got older, suggesting that money doesn’t makes the problem go away. And three-quarters had been to the dentist for at least one checkup in the past year.

If there is a mystery here, it is not confined to footballers. The study author, Professor Ian Needleman, also looked at athletes competing in the 2012 Olympics and [found that their mouths were, if anything, even worse](http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/47/16/1054.abstract?ijkey=cdaf7f5984f76c1153aa8c6f888d43401575c62c&keytype2=tf_ipsecsha). All the same problems existed at similar or higher levels, and 18% of those taking part said that their dental health had affected their performance.

[A clue does stand out in the report](http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/suppl/2015/10/01/bjsports-2015-094953.DC1/bjsports-2015-094953supp.pdf), however. At one of the eight clubs – “club E” – dental problems were far less serious than at the others (club A also wasn’t bad). This might indicate that the club E dentist is lax about recording problems, or it might mean that he or she is just doing a good job. For all the pampering footballers receive, perhaps they are just not eating as carefully as they should – maybe swayed by the allure of Dunkin’ Donuts (official partners of Liverpool), Gatorade (Arsenal) or Coca-Cola (official Fifa partners and World Cup sponsors). Perhaps, no matter how rich you are, someone needs to pester you to brush your teeth.