**Manchester United could blame poor displays on bad TEETH as study shows poor dental health can have negative impact on players' performances**

* **Top footballers are struggling for form due to bad teeth, experts claim**
* **Study shows four in 10 footballers have dental cavities**
* **Poor level of dental health affects footballers' performance and wellbeing**

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Published: 10:42, 3 November 2015 | Updated: 11:20, 3 November 2015

Footballers from top clubs including Manchester United have poor dental health, which affects their performance, researchers say.

Almost four out of 10 professional footballers have dental cavities, while one in 20 has irreversible gum disease.

Others suffer infections, while many experience regular toothache, found the study, published online in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

This poor level of dental health affects footballers' performance and wellbeing, and the sport 'urgently' needs to promote better dental care, experts behind the research said.

The dental health of footballers appears to be worse than for the general population, though experts have yet to pinpoint the exact reasons why.

Many footballers drink sports drinks several times a week, although evidence is 'unclear' on whether this is to blame.

The study involved 187 footballers from eight clubs - Hull, Manchester United, Southampton, Swansea City, West Ham, Brighton and Hove Albion, Cardiff and Sheffield United.

Six dentists checked the tooth and gum health of every player - equivalent to more than 90 per cent of each senior squad - and each footballer was asked about the impact of dental health on their personal and professional lives.

Almost three-quarters of players (73 per cent) had been to the dentist within the past 12 months and 22 per cent reported a history of trauma to their teeth or face due to the sport.

Some 64 per cent of players said they drank sports drinks at least three times per week, while 5 per cent used tobacco, mainly smokeless or chewing tobacco.

Researchers found that 37 per cent of the footballers had at least one tooth affected by decay while 77 per cent had needed fillings, with some needing more than five.

Overall, 84 per cent of all footballers had at least one decayed or filled tooth.

In 2012, former West Ham youngster Ravel Morrison was even sent home from a pre-season tour in need of urgent dental work and eventually had seven rotten teeth removed.

Dental 'erosion', where the tooth is worn away by acid, was present in 53 per cent of footballers, while 77 per cent of footballers had half of their mouth affected by gingivitis (inflammation of the gums). In 5 per cent of footballers, this was moderate to severe and irreversible.

Some 8 per cent of footballers had at least one ulcer, abscess or open sore, while one in 10 had regular toothache and 16 per cent experienced pain in their mouths. Over a quarter (27 per cent) had sensitivity to hot or cold drinks.

More than 45 per cent of footballers said they were 'bothered' by their oral health, with 20 per cent reporting an impact on their quality of life and 7 per cent reporting an impact on training or performance.

During the summer, West Ham defender Winston Reid revealed he was involved in a pre-season screening day after which he was told about his dental problems.

He said: 'In the beginning of the season West Ham organised a long screening day.

'The medical team had a look at our heart, blood, eyes and teeth. The dentist screened my teeth and explained to me in detail the dental problems that needed to be tackled to prevent painful teeth resulting in missing training.

'The club doctor organised a few dentist appointments and now a few months later I am smiling without worries, really top job from our medical boys.'

The researchers, including from University College London, said several things contribute to poor dental health, including food and drink and how much emphasis is placed on oral health in sport.

Some teams had worse teeth than others, suggesting there is a role for preventing tooth decay and introducing formal screening in clubs, they said.

'Few teams integrate oral health promotion within overall medical care, and there is therefore lack of ongoing support and reinforcement of this health area for the athletes,' they wrote.

'Oral health of professional footballers is poor, and this impacts on wellbeing and performance. Successful strategies to promote oral health within professional football are urgently needed.

'Furthermore, this study provides strong evidence to support oral health screening within professional football.'

The experts stressed the 'relationship between sports drinks and dental erosion remains unclear'.

One review, which was just on children, found no link, although another study on 3,000 people found drinking sports drinks was linked to tooth decay.

The footballers were typically aged 24, though they ranged in age from 18 to 39.

The British Dental Association's scientific adviser, Professor Damien Walmsley, said: 'If your favourite soccer team isn't doing well, you might want to ask them if they are they looking after their teeth.

'The high degree of erosion seen in footballers' teeth is likely to reflect a high consumption of either 'sports' or fizzy drinks following strenuous exercise. Footballers, like the rest of us, would be better off drinking water to quench their thirst after strenuous exercise rather than sports or fizzy drinks that place teeth at risk.

'Contrary to expectation, sports drinks are rarely a healthy choice. They don't necessarily contain high amounts of sugar, but the high levels of acidity can cause irreversible damage to teeth.

'The acid in these drinks breaks down the tooth's enamel, the shiny outer layer of your teeth, causing them to become sensitive to temperature changes and touch. On the other hand, many fizzy drinks do contain sugar and this will place teeth at risk of developing cavities or teeth decay.'