Rugby World Cup winner Steve Thompson and seven other former players claim the sport has left them with permanent brain damage - and are in the process of starting a claim against the game's authorities for negligence.Every member of the group has recently been diagnosed with the early signs of dementia, and they say repeated blows to the head are to blame.Thompson, 42, played in every England match when they won the 2003 World Cup, but says: "I can't remember any of those games. It's frightening."It is understood a letter of claim, amounting to millions of pounds in damages, will be sent next week to the governing bodies for English and Welsh rugby and World Rugby - and a group class action could follow.It is the first legal move of its kind in world rugby and, if successful, could force change to the way the game is played.Lawyers for the group suggest another 80 former players between the ages of 25 and 55 are showing symptoms and have serious concerns.Global governing body World Rugby told BBC Sport: "While not commenting on speculation, World Rugby takes player safety very seriously and implements injury-prevention strategies based on the latest available knowledge, research and evidence."The Rugby Football Union (RFU), which runs the sport in England, said: "The RFU has had no legal approach on this matter. The Union takes player safety very seriously and implements injury prevention and injury treatment strategies based on the latest research and evidence."The Union has played an instrumental role in establishing injury surveillance, concussion education and assessment, collaborating on research as well as supporting law changes and law application to ensure proactive management of player welfare."The Welsh Rugby Union (WRU) said it "supported and endorsed the World Rugby comment on the subject". Hooker Thompson played 195 times for Northampton Saints before moving to France to play for Brive. He won 73 England caps, and three for the British and Irish Lions, in a nine-year international career.He first retired in 2007 because of a serious neck injury but was given the all-clear to return, before being forced to [retire again](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rugby-union/16018570) in December 2011 with the same problem.Thompson, former England team-mate Michael Lipman, ex-Wales international Alix Popham and five other retired players are the first group to agree to - and have - testing.Thompson says his condition is so progressed he cannot remember anything that happened in those 2003 World Cup games."It's like I'm watching the game with England playing and I can see me there - but I wasn't there, because it's not me," he said."It's just bizarre. People talk about stories, and since the World Cup I've talked to the lads that were there, and you pick up stories, and then you can talk about it, but it's not me being there, it's not me doing it, because it's just gone."Thompson is convinced constant head knocks during matches and training are to blame."When we first started going full-time in the mid-1990s, training sessions could quickly turn into full contact," he said."There was one session when the scrummaging hadn't gone quite right and they made us do a hundred live scrums. When it comes to it, we were like a bit of meat, really."The whole point of us doing this is to look after the young players coming through. I don't want rugby to stop. It's been able to give us so much, but we just want to make it safer. It can finish so quickly, and suddenly you've got your whole life in front of you."Thompson, who has four children, is frank about his fears for the future and open about some dark thoughts."When you are there alone, the number of times you just think to yourself it's probably easier if you go, if I'm not here," he said."You start to think, it's not right to put them through that. That's the difficult side to it."