

# Are concussions doing more harm than good to young athletes?

By Max Linn

When you were growing up, what was your dream? Many kids wanted to be astronauts or doctors. What did I want to be? I wanted to play in the NFL.

From the moment my dad taught me how to throw a football when I was four years old, I knew I wanted to go pro. As I grew up, I realized I never had a chance. I am currently 5-foot-8 and 140 pounds at 21 years old. If I were playing college football right now, I would be getting rocked.

But little did I know the potential consequences of playing football.

Football is one of the more grueling sports in America. So many hard hits and detrimental injuries. One of the most controversial of those injuries is concussions.

On average there are [247 concussions](#) in the NFL every year. And one of the more dangerous outcomes medical researchers are still uncovering resulting from head trauma such as concussions is the potential to develop a disease known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

[CTE is a brain disease](#) that is caused by repeated hits to the head. Usually multiple concussions can lead to it. The more concussions one has, the more likely one is to have CTE.

Currently, neurologists cannot diagnose CTE in a living person. They can only tell if a brain has CTE if the person or their family donates the brain after death.

But there are symptoms such as memory loss, sudden mood changes, depression and manic behavior that neurologists have identified as signs of likely CTE.

Some of the most notable examples of the dangerous effects from CTE have been to professional football players, including San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau and former New England Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez.

Hernandez was one of the best tight ends in football when he was playing. In 2013 he was arrested for first degree murder, accused of killing his fiancée's sister's boyfriend, Odin Lloyd. While in prison, Hernandez was found dead after hanging himself.

Dr. Ann McKee, the neurologist who examined Hernandez' brain, [said](#) in 2017 that it was "one of the most significant contributions to our work" because it helped medical professionals understand the impact head trauma could have on the brain and what that could do to a person who developed CTE.

Hernandez's brain was diagnosed as stage 3 CTE. McKee also said it was one of the worst cases she had seen of someone around his age (27 years old).

Hernandez's family acknowledged he was very depressed in the later stages of his life. Neurologists studying his brain agreed CTE could have been the cause of his depression and ultimate suicide, stemming from brain damage due to playing football.

This isn't something new. Multiple former NFL players have come out and said they have suffered from depression. A lot could definitely be because of CTE.

CTE is most commonly found in football players, but also athletes who played other contact sports such as boxing and lacrosse because each involves constant hits to the head area.

Dr. Bennet Omalu was the first doctor credited with discovering CTE. The movie, "Concussion," starring Will Smith is based on Dr. Omalu's research.

After he released his findings to the public, more doctors and neurologists started to look into CTE. One of the more prominent researchers has been McKee, who developed a process called the McKee Staging Scheme that helps determine the severity of CTE. She currently leads research at an institute dedicated to studying CTE (insert name of the place at Boston U)

One of the common denominators in the research is that repeated hits to the head - like those occurring frequently in football - make it one of the main contributors to CTE.

Early on in the 2021 NFL season, New York Giants quarterback Daniel Jones took a gruesome hit in the game against the Dallas Cowboys. When he stood up, he was visibly shaken up. He could not walk in a straight line and was stumbling as he walked.

Surprisingly, Jones returned to play just a week later. The NFL now has a concussion protocol that dictates steps players must take in order to prove they are healthy enough to get back on the field, but that didn't always exist.

And the lower down in the ranks you go, the level of concern about concussions to players can be hit or miss.

Matuesz Telega, who was an offensive lineman in high school, never felt pressured by coaches to play even after suffering a concussion.

"No. They were very good at making sure I was fully cleared from my concussion so that I would hopefully not sustain another one," he said. "We also were not a very good football team so it didn't make a huge difference if I played or not. I have heard of big time high school football programs rushing players back from injury to try and win a state title."

There are times where teams, especially professionals, will quickly clear a player and send him back into the game. These coaches and owners just want to win and if their star player gets hurt they will do whatever it takes to get him back into the game.

The longer someone plays any contact sport, the greater risk they have of getting CTE.

Every year a person plays football, the chances you get CTE increase by 30%, according to Annals of Neurology. And then on top of that, every 2.6 years of playing football, the risk of [CTE doubles](#).

Just think about those statistics for a second.

The [average age](#) kids usually start playing football is five or six. Often they start out playing flag football and then as they get older progress to tackle.

“We start flag football at age 5 for kids in our area, said Donovan Henning, a flag football coach at xxxxxx. “Kids then switch to tackle football at age 10. The league I coach in knows about the history of football and head injuries so we try to make the way we play as safe as possible.” There are players who last 15 years in the NFL or another professional football league. They can’t be assumed to have CTE, but the chances increase every year they play.

The NFL however, is trying to make the game safer for quarterbacks and other players. They have implemented safer rules to try and prevent as many head to head hits. The quarterback can now slide and this is considered as “giving himself up”. What this means is once he slides he is automatically down. If a defender tackles or hits the quarterback while he is sliding it results in a fifteen yard unnecessary roughness penalty.

The NFL is also implementing penalties for defenders (or offensive players) when they lead with the crown of their helmet and make direct contact with the opposing player's helmet. There have been too many head to head hits in recent years and this will help diminish that.

The NFL is doing their best to make the game safer, but the reality is no matter how hard they try they will never be able to fully prevent head injuries.

There have been a countless amount of lawsuits against the NFL due to the head injuries sustained while playing.

[Aaron Hernandez's family tried to sue the NFL for \\$20 million](#) because of the head injuries sustained. The lawsuit failed in part because Hernandez didn't want to “retire” from the league. He was instead arrested and sent to jail so he was prohibited from playing.

Hernandez isn't the only former player to try and sue the NFL. Back in 2012 there was a lawsuit from over [4,500 players](#) who wanted a piece of the action.

As time goes on the NFL will always have to face questions about CTE and concussions. But they aren't the only sport to do so.

You have other contact sports such as boxing and lacrosse that sustain vicious shots to the head as well. In boxing the goal is to literally try and knock your opponent out. What could go wrong?

In youth soccer now, many leagues will not allow the players to head the ball. Some might think that's ridiculous, but [Dr. Omalu](#) recommended that kids don't play soccer until at least the age of 14. He says that when they head the ball and their brain isn't close to being fully developed it can hurt the development of the brain.

Youth soccer leagues are figuring out ways to get around a possible concussion crisis. But will football be able to follow suit?

Fans of football see big hits every week. Despite increased penalties for unsafe hits to the head, it's impossible to prevent it completely.

If the NFL is serious about trying to prevent concussions they should look into finding safer helmets for the players.

Players like Arizona Cardinals tight end [Zach Ertz](#) are trying to figure out how to make safer helmets.

The players want to continue playing football and finding a safer helmet might be the best way to try and prevent concussions.

"Yes. I wouldn't want to limit what they want to do. If they did start sustaining multiple concussions or injuries then I would have a talk with them about possibly giving it up," Telega said.

Many former players would allow their kids to experience the game they once felt such adrenaline playing. But will parents who haven't played the game share the same view?

Parents continuously have conversations with their kids about whether or not they are allowed to play football. A lot of the time that conversation results in the child playing another sport.

Until football as a whole figures out a way to minimize the risk, concussions will always be brought up in the same conversation as football.