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Dementia Risk Seen in Players in N.F.L. Study

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By Alan Schwarz

A study commissioned by the National Football League reports that Alzheimer's disease or similar memory-related diseases appear to have been diagnosed in the league's former players vastly more often than in the national population—including a rate of 19 times the normal rate for men ages 30 through 49.

The N.F.L. has long denied the existence of reliable data about cognitive decline among its players. These numbers would become the league's first public affirmation of any connection, though the league pointed to limitations of this study.

The findings could ring loud at the youth and college levels, which often take cues from the N.F.L. on safety policies and whose players emulate the pros. Hundreds of on-field concussions are sustained at every level each week, with many going undiagnosed and untreated.

Sean Morey, an Arizona Cardinals player who has been vocal in supporting research in this area, said: "This is about more than us—it's about the high school kid in 2011 who might die on the field because he ignored the risks of concussions."

Scrutiny of brain injuries in football players has escalated the past three years, with prominent professionals reporting cognitive problems and academic studies supporting a link more generally. The N.F.L. and its medical committee on concussions have steadfastly denied the existence of reliable data on the issue.

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Dr. Ira Casson, a co-chairman of the concussions committee who has been the league's primary voice denying any evidence connecting N.F.L. football and dementia, said: "What I take from this report is there's a need for further studies to see whether or not this finding is going to pan out, if it's really there or not."

Dr. Daniel P. Perl, the director of neuropathology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, said: "I think this complements what others have found — there appears to be a problem with cognition in a group of N.F.L. football players at a relatively young age."