

## RESPIRATORY ILLNESS IN THE FOOTBALLERS

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It is well established that the most common system affected by illness in athletes is the respiratory system.

Data from international football tournaments indicate that the incidence of illness is 7 -17/1,000 player days during an international tournament (2010 FIFA World Cup and Confederations Cup 2009) with >40% of illness affecting the respiratory tract (including the ear, nose and throat). The majority of these illnesses are attributed to respiratory tract infections.

These data are similar to that for other international sports tournaments and team sports.

Although most of these illnesses are transient and do not result in prolonged time loss, it is also known that some of these infections can affect multiple organ systems, including the skeletal and cardiac muscle. These systemic affects can increase the risk of acute medical complications during strenuous exercise. Therefore, the team physician is frequently faced with the clinical challenge of the diagnosis, management and return to safe play decisions in players presenting with acute respiratory tract illness.

The basis of the diagnosis and clinical assessment is to differentiate non-infective from infective illness, and to ascertain whether there is systemic multi-organ involvement. The choice of antibiotics for bacterial infections can also affect the risk of cardiac complications.

The return-to-play guidelines are based on the clinical assessment of localized vs. systemic symptoms and signs and the clinical neck check tool is frequently used.

Furthermore, prevention strategies in the individual player and team setting are important to reduce the risk of respiratory tract illness. Prevention strategies can include identification of at risk players, focusing on personal hygiene (hand washing and use of antimicrobial hand gels), monitoring training load, nutritional strategies including the possible use of probiotics, isolation of infected players, and local upper respiratory tract anti-microbial sprays.

It has been shown that international travel across multiple time zones increases the risk of illness, including respiratory tract illness. Therefore, these strategies are particularly important in the travelling team context.