

## MENTAL ILLNESS IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLERS

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#### Introduction

Analogously to elite athletes from other sport disciplines, professional footballers are likely to experience symptoms related to mental disorders.

During a career in professional football, stressors that may induce symptoms related to mental disorders among players are particularly the severe injuries as those might lead to surgery and to long period of time without training or competition. In addition, professional footballers are as any other human beings keen to be exposed to more conventional stressors such as major life events or career dissatisfaction.

By contrast to the large information available about the physical health of players (injury occurrence), scientific knowledge about mental health in professional football is lacking. According to the aforementioned, the primary aim of the study was to determine the prevalence of symptoms related to mental disorders (distress, anxiety/depression, sleeping disturbance, adverse alcohol behavior, smoking, adverse nutrition behavior) among professional footballers.

#### Methods

Cross-sectional analyses were performed on baseline questionnaires from an ongoing prospective cohort study among professional footballers. Participants were professional footballers being currently member of national players' union in Belgium, Chile, Finland, France, Japan, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Outcome measures were symptoms related to mental disorders (distress, anxiety/depression, sleep disturbance, adverse alcohol behavior, smoking, adverse nutrition behavior) assessed through several validated scales such as the Distress Screener, the 12-item General Health Questionnaire and the AUDIT-C.

Based on outcome measures (and potential stressors), an electronic questionnaire was set-up in English, French and Spanish. Prevalence rates and 95% confidence interval were calculated.

#### Results

A total of 607 professional footballers were involved in the analyses (response rate of 37%). The participants were on average 27 years old, and 55% were playing in the highest leagues of their countries.

During their football career (mean duration of 7.8 years), the players had already incurred on average 2.2 severe (time-loss >28 days) injuries, and had had 1.1 surgeries.

Prevalence of symptoms related to mental disorders among professional footballers ranged from 4% for smoking and 9% for adverse alcohol behavior to 38% for anxiety/depression and 58% for adverse nutrition behavior.

**Conclusion**

The present study has shown that the prevalence of symptoms related to mental disorders was high among professional footballers, confirming a previous study in a similar study population. In the light of these findings, raising the self-awareness of professional footballers about mental disorders as well as developing and implementing evidence-based protecting and preventive measures should be prioritized by the different stakeholders within professional football.

Next to the attention given to the diagnostic, potential surgery, rehabilitation program and return to play process of injured players, the team doctor as well as the orthopaedic surgeon should be keen to also have a special focus on potential symptoms related to mental disorders that might occur among professional footballers.

This multidisciplinary approach might allow to take care in an early stage of symptoms that might develop into severe mental health disorders on the long term, and it might lead to better and safer sustainable return to play.