

# Research suggests playing football before age 12 could have long-term health effects

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Research suggests that playing American football before the age of 12 may have long-term consequences for players' mood and behaviour. The study is published today (19 Sep) in the journal *Translational Psychiatry*.

Dr David Reynolds, Chief Scientific Officer at Alzheimer's Research UK, said:

"As evidence of a link between high impact sports and problems with later-life brain function comes to light, it is important to identify the factors that might be behind to this association. American football has perhaps received the most attention in terms of a long-term impact on [brain health](#) but there are still many questions about why some players might go on to experience [neurological problems](#) and others don't. The age at which people take up the sport is a potential risk factor, as people who start playing earlier may be exposed to collisions for longer and at a point in their lives at which the brain is still developing.

"This study found that taking up American football before the age of 12 was linked to an increased risk of mood and behaviour problems at age 51, but not to problems with memory and thinking skills. The study did not look at whether people who started playing American football before the age of 12 had more physical damage to the brain or whether any group was more likely to develop dementia later in life. While dementia can involve mood and behaviour changes as well as memory problems, there are a number of factors that can influence these aspects of [brain](#) function. The researchers did take into account factors like depression

and medication use, but teasing out cause and effect from studies like this remains a challenge.

"Sports like American [football](#) not only form part of many people's social and cultural lives, but can contribute to a healthy active lifestyle. It is important that findings highlighting the potential risks of any sport are followed up with further research so that people can make informed decisions about the activities they get involved in and how best to minimise any risks."

**More information:** J Nagy et al. Altered neurite morphology and cholinergic function of induced pluripotent stem cell-derived neurons from a patient with Kleefstra syndrome and autism, *Translational Psychiatry* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/tp.2017.144](https://doi.org/10.1038/tp.2017.144)

Provided by Alzheimer's Research UK

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