Playing professional football may shorten players' lives

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Credit: football wife from Pexels

Several recent studies have concluded that professional football players tend to live longer than other "American men in general." This research implies that the benefits of professional football, including physical

fitness and affluence, may outweigh risks such as cardiovascular and neurological health problems.

Researchers from the University of Minnesota have questioned the accuracy of these findings on the grounds that professional football players are unlike "American men in general" in ways that are consequential for mortality.

"When we started digging into the literature on later life health outcomes for professional American football players, we were initially surprised to find a relatively large number of studies that found football players lived longer than American men in general," said Gina Rumore, program development director of the Institute for Social Research and Data Innovation and an author on the paper.

"We believe a better strategy for understanding the association between playing football and mortality is to compare football players to men who are like them in every respect—except they never played professional football," Rumore added.

In a new study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the research team conducted two sets of analyses. First, they compared men drafted to play professional football in the 1950s—some of whom played and some of whom never played in any professional league. Second, they compared professional football players who began their careers in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s to a nationally representative group of men who—like football players—were employed, not disabled, not in poverty and who completed at least three years of college.

In both analyses, they found:

- Linemen die earlier than otherwise similar men.

- Other position players die no sooner or later.

In the second analysis, they found:

- 3.1% of football players died within 25 years of initial observation.
- 2.3% of comparable American men died within that time frame.

"Professional football players may live longer than 'American men in general,' but this does not mean that playing professional football extends players' lives," said Rob Warren, a professor in the U of M College of Liberal Arts and lead author of the study. "In fact, when we compare players to otherwise comparable men, linemen's lives are shorter and other players' lives are about the same length."

While this research only considers men who have played professional football, future research will compare the longevity of American football players to those who have never played football before at any level.

More information: John Robert Warren et al, The association between playing professional American football and longevity, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2308867120](#)

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