

Study provides new insights into sleep and mental health of athletes

September 9 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

From experiencing career-ending injuries to facing a barrage of criticism on social media, the 2024 Olympics have highlighted once again the physical and mental toll that can weigh heavily on men and

women in sport.

A new study from Flinders University has shed light on the prevalence of sleep and mental health disorders among athletes, suggesting a pressing need for better support systems within sports organizations.

Almost 1,000 athletes from around the world took part in the large-scale survey to provide comprehensive insights into their quality of sleep and mental health, the occurrence of these issues between current and retired athletes and how willing they were to seek help.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Australian Psychologist*.

The survey is part of a larger research project that aims to assess the incidence and types of sleep and mental health disorders that exist within the sporting population to fill in gaps in data available across [different sports](#) and competition levels and genders in sport.

Lead investigator Ashley Montero says it is more important than ever to safeguard athletes' mental health both during their career and beyond, with findings revealing that both current and former athletes show similar rates of sleep disturbances and mental health disorders.

"Our latest findings will help to paint a picture of what challenges athletes experience during and after their careers, and how we can offer specific support to address their concerns," says Mr. Montero, who is part of Flinders's SHAPE and FHMRI Sleep Health.

"We found that there were distinct differences between genders with women athletes reporting more [mental health disorders](#) than men, including higher rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders," says Mr. Montero. "All athletes who had both sleep and mental health problems struggled more in everyday life than those with just one of

those issues.

"Interestingly, whether someone was an active athlete, or a retired one did not seem to change how often they reported sleep or mental health issues, with both groups reporting similar rates of these disorders after retirement.

"This highlights that retired athletes still face mental health challenges and that sports organizations should provide support even after athletes retire. Importantly, many athletes were hesitant to seek help, especially within their sport, for fear of their privacy being compromised by reporting that they'd prefer to talk to a doctor or psychologist outside of their sports organizations.

"We also found that older athletes were more likely to report having issues, possibly because they felt more comfortable seeking help as they age," says Mr. Montero.

Professor Murray Drummond, Director of Flinders' SHAPE and a co-supervisor of Mr. Montero's Ph.D. study, says these research outcomes could inform education strategies.

"This study highlights the pressing need for tailored mental health initiatives in sports that address gender disparities and facilitate those seeking effective help and support," says Professor Drummond. "By improving education and resources for athletes—regardless of competition level and playing status—sports organizations can play a crucial role in fostering a healthier environment for all [athletes](#)."

More information: Ashley Montero et al, Self-reported prevalence of sleep and mental health disorders in current and former athletes: a preliminary cross-sectional investigation of help-seeking behaviours, *Australian Psychologist* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/00050067.2024.2357283](https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2024.2357283)

Provided by Flinders University

Citation: Study provides new insights into sleep and mental health of athletes (2024, September 9) retrieved 9 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-09-insights-mental-health-athletes.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.