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Hamstring Injuries Rising Among Pro Soccer Players

REUTERS HEALTH INFORMATION

By Madeline Kennedy | January 25, 2016

(Reuters Health) - Elite male soccer players are still more likely to injure their hamstrings during a match than in training, but training injuries are steadily rising, according to a recent study.

Changes in training methods may be to blame, the authors say, and teams rarely use injury-prevention exercises that could help players avoid these common injuries that cause expensive down-time for professional teams.

The "hamstring" refers to a group of muscles that run along the back of the thigh, behind the knee.

"We know that hamstring injury is the most common sinew injury. It's a great problem for elite soccer players," said lead author Jan Ekstrand of Linkoping University in Sweden.

To address the problem, specific types of training may be more important at the elite level than just strength and strength exercises, Ekstrand told Reuters Health.

The researchers collected data on injuries and attendance reports from 36 Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) teams across 12 countries. The current study, published online January 8 in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, is part of a larger long-term study sponsored by UEFA.

Team medical staff sent the researchers monthly updates during soccer seasons between 2001 and 2014, including information about first-time and recurring hamstring injuries. Players were considered to be injured for as long as they were not fully participating in training and matches.

Overall, the researchers counted 1,614 hamstring injuries over the 13-year period, with 35% occurring during training and 65% during match play.

The average number of days lost per injury was 17, though the injury periods ranged from zero days lost to more than a year.

The hamstring injury rate - based on injuries per hours of play - was nine times higher during games than during training sessions.

Overall, hamstring injuries increased by 2.3% per year. But the match injury rate did not change significantly, while injuries during training went up by 4% a year.

More than one fifth of players had at least one hamstring injury during a season, and 13% of injuries were recurrences of a previous one. Typically these happened within two months of returning to the game.

Part of the problem may be a new protocol popular among coaches, Ekstrand said. "They all think that the training sessions should mimic the matches and that means that the intensity of the trainings in most teams has increased."

Tim Gabbett, a sports injury researcher at Australian Catholic University who wasn't involved in the study, has a different view. More intense training may not explain the rise in hamstring injuries, but rather coaches may be increasing training intensity too quickly, he said.

"High training loads are not necessarily the cause of sporting injuries - but rather how you get there is more important," Gabbett said by email.

Gabbett recommends that coaches minimize the week-to-week increases in training. "It's good to train hard, as long as we also train smart," he said.

"If players are rushed back to training following injury, without performing an adequate amount of rehabilitation training - this also increases their risk," Gabbett added, noting that more than one eighth of hamstring injuries were recurrences of older injuries.

Ekstrand said an exercise called the Nordic Hamstring Exercise, a partnered strengthening exercise that specifically targets hamstrings, can help prevent injuries at the amateur level.

For professional players, however, additional strength training may not be enough and a more holistic approach is needed, he said.

"It's not only about providing athletes with the training program . . . on the elite level, we need to broaden our vision and think of other matters, for example well-being of athletes or the coaching style," Ekstrand said.

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