

Injuries and illness are big concerns for Paralympic athletes, unique study reveals

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Parasport continues to grow worldwide. A new thesis from Lund University in Sweden shows how Paralympic athletes run the risk of both being injured by strenuous training as well as being affected by

injuries and illness due to their impairment. The results indicate that the incidence is almost twice as high when compared with similar studies of athletes in Sweden with no disabilities.

The researchers therefore suggest that keeping athletes healthy while advancing parasport requires a more equal, informed and preventive way of working.

"We see a considerable need to prevent injuries and illness in order for athletes to perform at the highest level. This is the first study in the world that has charted sports-related injuries and illnesses within parasport over time. The results show that [preventive measures](#) need to be adapted specifically to Paralympic athletes," says physiotherapist Kristina Fagher, a member of the research team Rehabilitation Medicine at Lund University who has just published the thesis "Sports-related injuries and illnesses in Paralympic athletes."

Initially, eighteen Swedish Paralympic athletes active at the highest level were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of sports-related injuries. The interview answers pointed to insufficient interventions and a lack of knowledge in preventive work. The group also mentioned injuries as a result of their impairment, such as shoulder injuries among wheelchair athletes, and collisions between athletes with impaired vision.

"They also stated that it was difficult to have a disability and then a sports-related [injury](#) on top of that. Everyday life became harder, and if training sessions were cancelled this could lead to depression, stress and anxiety," says Kristina Fagher.

Just over 100 Swedish Paralympic athletes then described their impairments, training behaviour and sports-related injuries/illnesses over the past year in an e-health application that was specifically developed

for Paralympic athletes. It was shown that mainly the [young athletes](#) in the 18-25 age group who suffered recurrent pain and regularly took painkillers, were affected by serious sports injuries.

"Young athletes train more and exhibit higher risk behaviour, and at the same time their bodies are not fully developed. This group would truly need preventive work, so that they do not sustain injuries this early in life," says Kristina Fagher.

After having also gathered information about training and injuries/illness over a one-year period in real time, the following patterns could be seen:

- Two-thirds of all athletes had been injured during the year
- 59 percent of the injuries were caused by the impairment, and a large part of the injuries were serious sports injuries.
- The risk of injury was higher for male athletes, for those involved in team sports and for those who had previously had a serious injury.
- Half of the athletes stated that they experienced pain every week and the majority reported that they slept badly.
- Seventy-seven percent had been affected by [illness](#), mostly infections, during the year. Some of these infections could be ascribed to the impairment, such as urinary infections among athletes with spinal cord injuries.

"There is consequently a considerable need to prevent both sports-related injuries and illnesses in order for Paralympic athletes to perform at the highest level, and the results show that preventive measures need to be adapted specifically for Paralympic athletes," say Kristina Fagher, who continues:

"We see a need for preventive work to be implemented and developed on several different levels: in research, in sports organisations and among

the coaches. And, athletes themselves should be more involved all along the line. The results of our studies also have a bearing internationally and can be used to improve medical service for Paralympic athletes around the world, both during training and in major competitions," she concludes.

Provided by Lund University

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