

# High academic stress linked to increased illness, injuries among college football players

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Coaches and trainers strive to keep their players healthy so they can perform at their maximum potentials. Injury restrictions, or limits on athletes' physical activity due to illnesses or injuries, can keep athletes on the bench for a game or even an entire season. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found college football players are more likely to experience injuries during test weeks than during training camp. The effects of academic stress on injury occurrences are even more pronounced among starting players, the researchers found.

"Stress is systemic," said Bryan Mann, an assistant professor of physical therapy in the MU School of Health Professions and assistant director of strength and conditioning for Mizzou Athletics. "Everything players deal with on a daily basis creates stress. They don't have separate accounts to withdraw from for practice, school and relationships. Whenever there's stress, something's got to give. Otherwise, it's similar to when unexpected expenses arise at the same time and you're likely to overdraw your checking account. It's the same idea but on a physiological basis rather than a monetary one."

The researchers studied weekly injury reports for 101 student athletes on a Division 1 college football team during a 20-week season. Sixty different athletes had 86 injury restrictions during the season. The researchers found players were 3.19 times more likely to have an injury restriction during weeks when they had high academic stress, such as midterms or finals, than during weeks when they had low academic stress. When the researchers compared players' injury restrictions for weeks of high physical stress - such as training camp - and weeks of low academic stress, athletes were 2.84 times more likely to have injury restrictions.

"We know when there will be midterms or finals, and we can plan for these academic stressors and accommodate practices accordingly to minimize the risk of injuries," Mann said. "Some stressors we can't predict, but if we know about them, then there are things that we can do. Coaches should get to know the athletes and watch how their attitudes change. As attitudes change, it usually indicates that something else is going on in their lives. We've got to find those causes so we can be proactive and get the athletes counseling or find other ways to meet their needs."

At Mizzou, several resources exist to help student-athletes minimize stress and stay healthy. The Total Person Program encompasses academic support services, student-athlete development - through personal and social development programming, career counseling and community service - and sport and psychological counseling services. Additionally, the Athletic Performance Department provides student-athletes with guidance in strength and conditioning, sports nutrition and applied performance; student-athletes also receive comprehensive health care through MU's Sports Medicine department.

"Whereas the demands placed on the student-athletes are high, it is imperative that we provide services that focus on their health and well-being," said Bryan Maggard, the executive associate athletic director of Mizzou Athletics and director of the Total Person Program. "Our comprehensive services are geared to assist all students academically, socially and competitively."

**More information:** Mann, J. B., Bryant, K., Johnstone, B., Ivey, P., & Sayers, S. P. (2015). The effect of physical and academic stress on illness and injury in division 1 college football players. *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, 1.

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