

## Doctors find potential link between athletes' head injuries and ALS

Christina Dickinson 3 hrs ago

BOSTON (AP) - Scientists funded in part by the NFL say they have found evidence connecting head injuries in athletes to a condition that mimics Lou Gehrig's disease.

Dr. Ann McKee said she found toxic proteins in the spinal cords of three athletes who had suffered head injuries and were later diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, or ALS. Those same proteins have been found in the brains of athletes with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a disease linked to head injuries that causes cognitive decline, abnormal behavior and dementia.

The findings, announced Tuesday, are to be published in September's issue of the Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology.

McKee is a neurology professor at Boston University who has studied CTE in athletes. She also is director of neuropathology for the Department of Veterans Affairs at the Bedford VA Medical Center, where research has been conducted on the brains and spinal cords of 12 athletes donated by family members.

McKee noticed that an unusually high number of football players seemed to be affected by ALS. The disease attacks nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, and destroys the ability to move and speak.

She studied the brains and spinal cords of ex-Minnesota Vikings linebacker Wally Hilgenberg, former Southern California linebacker Eric Scoggins, and a boxer whose family asked that his name be kept private.

She found the toxic proteins in the spines of all three. The proteins were not present in the spines of athletes with CTE who didn't have Lou Gehrig's disease. Nor had she seen them in non-athletes who died of ALS.

The findings suggest that the motor neuron disease

that affected the three athletes is similar to - but not exactly the same as - ALS. McKee and her colleagues are calling this new disease as chronic traumatic encephalomyopathy (CTEM). They say it is "likely caused" by repetitive head trauma athletes can be exposed to in contact sports.

The BU researchers say head injuries from baseball and playing football at Columbia University might have contributed to Lou Gehrig's motor neuron disease. They say their research raises the question of whether the New York Yankees' Hall of Fame first baseman had CTEM, rather than ALS - the disease which bears Gehrig's name.

The NFL announced in April it would donate \$1 million to Boston University School of Medicine, becoming the first sports league to financially support the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy's research into the long-term effects of repetitive brain trauma in athletes.

The BU researchers have been critical of the league's stance on concussions in the past.

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