

NFL athletes are seeking unproven stem cell treatments

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Some National Football League (NFL) players have been seeking out unproven stem cell therapies to help accelerate recoveries from injuries, according to a new paper from Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. While most players seem to receive treatment within the United States, several have traveled abroad for therapies unavailable domestically and may be unaware of the risks involved, the paper found.

The paper is published in the *2014 World Stem Cell Report*, which is a special supplement to the journal *Stem Cells and Development* and is the official publication of the 2014 World Stem Cell Summit being held Dec. 3-5 in San Antonio.

"With the rise of new and unproven stem cell treatments, the NFL faces a daunting task of trying to better understand and regulate the use of these therapies in order to protect the health of its [players](#)," said Kirstin Matthews, the Baker Institute fellow in science and technology policy and an expert on ethical and policy issues related to biomedical research and development. She co-authored the paper with Maude Rowland Cuchiara, the Baker Institute scholar for science and technology policy.

Each year, more than 700 stem cell clinics around the world open their doors to "stem cell tourists," according to the paper's authors. Patients travel abroad to seek treatment for ailments—ranging from autism to multiple sclerosis and paralysis—for which no cure exists and treatment options are limited. The use of [stem cells](#) as orthopedic therapies in the U.S. is becoming more commonplace and has drawn the attention of

elite athletes, most notably NFL players, who have been vocal about receiving stem cell treatments and their successful recoveries. The paper notes that 12 NFL players have been identified publicly as having received an unapproved stem cell treatment since 2009.

"The online data on NFL players and the clinics where they obtained treatment suggest that players may be unaware of the risks they are taking," Matthews said. "Furthermore, players who are official spokespersons for these clinics could influence others to view the therapies as safe and effective despite the lack of scientific research to support these claims."

The paper notes that while unproven stem cell treatments in U.S.-based clinics rarely have severe side effects, they also arguably have little to no appreciable therapeutic benefits. The paper focuses on treatments unapproved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and undertaken by NFL players in the past five years. The authors highlight the types of treatments obtained and how the clinics advertise specifically to athletes. They also review the intended and unintended consequences of high-profile players receiving and advocating for these types of therapies.

The authors suggest the NFL and other sports leagues should review the procedures for stem cell treatment to determine how best to support, evaluate and possibly regulate stem cell treatments to ensure the safety of their players and their followers. "This could be organized similarly to the NFL investigations on the effects of concussions and traumatic brain injuries," Matthews said.

In addition, the NFL should convene an independent committee of medical professionals, without ties to the NFL or any of its teams, to evaluate the safety and efficacy of the therapies, establishing a set of criteria for what is considered "safe" and "effective," the authors said. This committee would make recommendations to the NFL on unproven

stem cell treatments and could also investigate other new and controversial medical interventions.

Finally, the authors said, the NFL should devote funds for research on [stem cell therapies](#) and evaluating the safety and success of previous studies. "The NFL research could focus on safety of the treatment and the potential short- and long-term effects of the procedures," Matthews said. "The research should also assess the claim that the therapies can shorten recovery times after injury and if the procedure should be considered 'performance-enhancing.' Once they evaluate these items, the NFL, along with the NFL Players Association, can determine if and how they want to regulate stem treatments. By staying abreast of the development of these therapies, the NFL will protect itself and its players by enabling new and beneficial treatments while curbing illegitimate and unsafe usage."

More information: "U.S. National Football League Athletes Seeking Unproven Stem Cell Treatments," *2014 World Stem Cell Report*, 2014.

Provided by Rice University

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