

NFL linemen keep growing, putting their health at risk, experts say

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(HealthDay)—As the Denver Broncos and Carolina Panthers gear up for

Sunday's Super Bowl 50 showdown, many may be focused on the potential dangers of concussion, but that's not the only health risk football players face.

Concern about the size of players—especially linemen—has been growing along with the players' waistlines. And some researchers are now suggesting that these athletes should be monitored for health problems.

Physicians who work with overweight National Football League and college-level [football players](#) "should be aware of the potential for elevated blood pressure, diabetes and abnormal cholesterol levels," said Jeffrey Potteiger, co-author of a commentary reviewing the possible risks facing these young men. And the risk is especially high in athletes who pack plenty of fat around the abdomen, he added.

Potteiger, a physical education specialist and dean of the graduate school at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich., said these players may face even greater risks once their playing days are finished.

For years, researchers have tracked the ever-widening bodies of football players. The average weight of offensive and defensive linemen in American college football ballooned from around 190 pounds in the 1950s to 290 pounds in 2010, previous research has shown.

At the end of the 2014 college football season, an analysis of most teams found that the average offensive lineman weighed more than 300 pounds; the average weight on the University of Mississippi's offensive line was a stunning 334 pounds. On the pro level, the Buffalo Bills offensive line was about as heavy at an average of 332 pounds in 2014, background information in the study said.

"In general, bigger athletes have more success in sports where size is a

determining factor for success. This is especially true in American football," Potteiger said.

"Bigger athletes are usually more powerful, harder to move, more difficult to tackle and better blockers. And if the defensive linemen are bigger, they are harder to block or move. So there is a need for bigger offensive linemen to move the defensive linemen out of the way," he said.

Higher levels of weight and more fat in the abdomen, in particular, boost the risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease, Potteiger said. They also raise the risk of metabolic syndrome, which refers to a group of related problems—such as [high blood pressure](#), high blood sugar and high cholesterol—that increase the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke, the researchers said.

While heightened fitness may protect the athletes from health problems when they're young and active, they could fall victim to disease after their athletic careers are over, Potteiger suggested.

Dr. James Borchers agreed. He's a team physician and director of sports medicine at Ohio State University in Columbus. "The biggest issue for the football athlete comes after they're finished," he said.

Some [professional football players](#) may finish their careers by the age of 26, "when you've got a lot of life to lead," Borchers said.

When they're on the field, he said, fitness may indeed protect heavy football players, even if their movements on the field during plays only last seconds.

"In many places today, especially professional athletics and collegiate athletics, there's so much emphasis placed on fitness and nutrition.

Players are better off even if they're carrying extra weight than they were 20 to 25 years ago," Borchers said.

Still, Borchers said he doesn't see any end to continuing weight gain in football linemen. "It's amazing," he said, pointing to news about a Baylor University player who's 6 feet, 8 inches tall, and reportedly weighs 403 pounds. And 7-foot high school player from California has topped him at 440 pounds, according to news reports.

As for the idea of instituting rules about how heavy players can be, Borchers said it would be difficult to set limits based on something such as body mass index, a common measurement that doesn't separate fat from muscle.

Borchers believes physicians must pay more attention to the issue of body weight in football players. And he acknowledged that "it's not one of the classic things we think about in sports medicine, like concussion, and muscle and skeletal injuries."

The study was published recently in the *Strength and Conditioning Journal*.

More information: For the NFL's perspective about player health, check its [health and safety page](#).

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