

The role of physiotherapy in AFLW injuries

To say that women's football has exploded in the last six months is an understatement. The exposure brought by the AFLW has filtered down to the local level and women everywhere are showing interest in the game.

The Southern Districts Football League has already begun their first ever women's competition and The Victorian Amateur Football Association kicked off their inaugural women's competition this year. From what was initially an expression of interest in a premier league competition has had over a thousand women register and now three divisions have been created.

So, with this increase in activity, have we seen an increase in injuries? Absolutely! Four players in the AFLW sustained an ACL injury in the first four weeks of competition. As compared with the one per year average at AFL clubs.

But why?...

There are numerous factors:

1.The Nature of the sport: Football is unique from many other sports that have previously dominated the female sporting landscape such as netball, tennis, running, basketball and general gym fitness (Source: ABS) in that it requires full contact tackling.

2.Risk Factors: Given that football is a relatively new option for women, there has been an influx of women either commencing

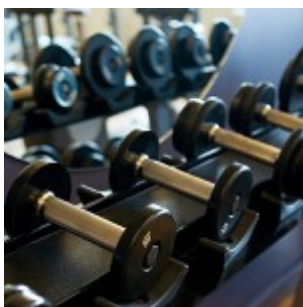
or returning to the sport after a long absence, at many different age groups. As seen in the AFLW, there was a higher proportion of athletes in their thirties than is usually seen in the AFL. Increasing age statistically correlates with an increased injury risk across both genders. There is also a reasonable body of evidence to support the theory that females are more likely to rupture their ACL due to specific anatomical and hormonal differences.



3. Reduced Exposure to Traditional Injury Prevention: There is mounting research to support the concept that strength training reduces injury risk for various injuries and not just ACL's. Given that many women's football clubs are in their infancy, facilities and funding are often scarce and exposure to strength and conditioning programs vary greatly from club to club.

Considering all these factors, you can already see how the recreational female footballer can become part of this high risk group!

So what can we do about it?



Strength Training- Major sporting bodies such as FIFA and Netball Australia have utilised current research to create injury prevention preparation programs. The programs are designed develop the way players absorb load and tolerate training and incorporate elements of strength training and effective warm up drills. Prevention programs can be helpful to introduce an athlete to strength training with a view to developing a more complex strength program.

Recovery and load management- Although it can be tempting for coaches at the recreational level to 'go hard' to get their

athletes into shape, research has shown that even small increases in unaccustomed load can lead to the development of a tendinopathy (tendon injuries). Recent research suggested a 'safe zone' for increasing training loads at around 5-10% (reference) and above 20% as increasing the risk of injury.

If you are a female footballer, a physiotherapist can assist you in developing an effective strengthening program that incorporates the right amount of load.

Contact your [local clinic](#) today and make sure you are in the right condition to minimise injury.

IMAGE SOURCE: AFLW, Western Bulldogs' Ellie Blackburn, www.aflplayers.com.au