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Sports Injuries: A Comprehensive Review on Prevention and Rehabilitation

S. Sathish Kumar[1,*], W. Vinu[2], Dilshith A. Kabeer[3], G. Vinod Kumar[4]

[1,2,3,4]Department of Physical Education and Sports, Pondicherry University, Kalapet, Pondicherry, India.
sathishwaits@gmail.com[1], vinu@pondiuni.ac.in[2], dilshith.dpe@pondiuni.ac.in[3], victorvickyvimal@gmail.com[4]

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Athletes, coaches, and healthcare professionals are still quite worried about sports injuries since they can happen for many different reasons and have many different effects. These injuries stem from a combination of physiological, biomechanical, environmental, and psychological variables, impacting both physical performance and long-term health and mental well-being. This review brings together the most recent studies on the epidemiology, aetiology, prevention, and rehabilitation of sports injuries across different athlete groups. Injury risk is influenced by both intrinsic characteristics (such as age, gender, flexibility, and neuromuscular control) and external factors (such as training load, playing surface, and ambient conditions). Recent progress emphasises multifactorial preventative measures that incorporate neuromuscular training, strength and conditioning, and individualised load monitoring for each athlete. The importance of psychological support throughout rehabilitation is highlighted, as it boosts motivation, confidence, and adherence to treatment. New technologies, such as wearable sensors, motion capture systems, and AI-based injury prediction models, are changing how we analyse injuries and deliver personalised rehabilitation. Even though there has been improvement, there are still gaps in research into long-term results, gender-specific rehabilitation, and the psychological and social aspects of recovering from an injury.

Keywords: Sports Injuries; Injury Epidemiology; Injury Risk Factors; Psychological Support; Neuromuscular Control; Training Load; Injury Prevention Psychological Factors; Wearable Technology.

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1. Introduction

Sports injuries continue to pose a substantial challenge for athletes, coaches, healthcare providers, and sports scientists worldwide. Their multifactorial nature, arising from the complex interactions among physiological, biomechanical, environmental, and psychological factors, makes understanding, preventing, and managing these injuries a demanding task. The consequences of sports injuries extend far beyond the immediate physical damage; they can disrupt athletic performance, compromise long-term health, and adversely affect an athlete's psychological well-being, confidence, and motivation to return to sport. This review aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the contemporary literature on the epidemiology, aetiology, prevention, and rehabilitation of sports-related injuries across diverse athletic populations and disciplines. The discussion emphasises both intrinsic factors, such as age, gender, previous injury history, flexibility, strength imbalances, and

neuromuscular control, and extrinsic factors, including training load, playing surface, equipment, and environmental conditions, which collectively influence injury susceptibility. Recent advances in injury prevention underscore the importance of multifaceted approaches that combine neuromuscular training, proprioceptive exercises, strength and conditioning programs, and load-monitoring strategies to reduce injury incidence and recurrence. Evidence supports the implementation of individualised prevention protocols tailored to the athlete's sport, training level, and biomechanical profile. Moreover, early and ongoing psychological support during rehabilitation has emerged as a critical determinant of successful recovery, facilitating adherence to treatment, mitigating anxiety, and enhancing confidence during the return-to-play process [19].

The review also explores emerging trends that are redefining the field of sports injury science. Innovations such as wearable sensor technologies, advanced motion capture systems, and biomechanical modelling are providing unprecedented insights into movement patterns and injury mechanisms. Additionally, integrating artificial intelligence and machine learning into injury surveillance and prediction models holds significant promise for personalised risk assessment. Furthermore, developments in personalised rehabilitation protocols, informed by data-driven analytics and interdisciplinary collaboration, are revolutionising recovery outcomes and reducing the likelihood of reinjury. Despite these advancements, notable research gaps persist. There remains a need for longitudinal, multidisciplinary studies that bridge the gap between laboratory findings and real-world sports environments.

The psychosocial dimensions of injury, gender-specific responses to rehabilitation, and the long-term health impacts of recurrent injuries also warrant further exploration. This review underscores that addressing sports injuries requires a holistic, evidence-based framework that integrates biomechanics, physiology, psychology, and technology. Such an approach not only enhances athlete safety and performance but also fosters sustainable sports participation and well-being across all levels of athletic engagement. They affect athletes across all levels, from elite professionals to recreational participants and youth athletes in developmental programs. Globally, sports-related injuries contribute significantly to the healthcare burden, with millions of cases reported annually in emergency departments and sports clinics [5].

These injuries are not only acute health problems but also long-term concerns that can limit training continuity, reduce competitive performance, and, in severe cases, lead to premature retirement from sport. A sports injury can be broadly defined as any physical damage sustained during training, competition, or recreational activity that results in loss of participation, reduced function, or the need for medical intervention [14]. These injuries can be categorised into acute traumatic injuries, such as ligament sprains, fractures, and concussions, or chronic overuse injuries, such as tendinopathies, stress fractures, and muscle strains resulting from repetitive microtrauma. The distinction between acute and overuse injuries is crucial because each type has different risk factors, prevention strategies, and rehabilitation protocols. The prevalence and types of sports injuries often vary across sports, age groups, and competition levels. Contact sports such as football, rugby, and basketball have a higher incidence of acute traumatic injuries due to collisions and high-impact demands.

In contrast, endurance-based activities such as running, swimming, and cycling are more commonly associated with overuse injuries resulting from repetitive strain [17]. Adolescent athletes, in particular, are at heightened risk due to growth-related vulnerabilities in bones and muscles, improper training loads, and insufficient recovery [2]. On the other hand, ageing athletes face degenerative conditions and reduced tissue elasticity, which predispose them to different injury profiles. Beyond the physical burden, sports injuries often carry profound psychological and social consequences. Injured athletes frequently report feelings of anxiety, depression, and reduced self-efficacy during rehabilitation [9]. For elite athletes, injury can threaten professional identity and financial stability, while for youth athletes, it may disrupt skill development and lead to dropout from sport.

The psychosocial dimension of injury highlights the need for holistic approaches to prevention and management, integrating psychological support with physical rehabilitation. The economic implications of sports injuries further underscore their importance. At the individual level, injuries often result in medical costs, physiotherapy expenses, and loss of earnings for professional athletes. At the institutional and societal levels, sports injuries increase healthcare expenditures, reduce athletic performance, and strain healthcare systems, particularly in countries with widespread sports participation. For example, in the United States, sports and recreational injuries account for more than 3.5 million annual medical visits among children and adolescents alone. In low- and middle-income countries, the burden may be even greater due to limited access to rehabilitation services and insufficient injury surveillance systems.

Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape injury risk. Intrinsic factors include age, sex, fitness level, flexibility, neuromuscular control, and prior injury history, while extrinsic factors encompass equipment, training loads, environmental conditions, and playing surfaces [18]. The interaction of these factors creates a multifactorial landscape, making injury prevention a complex challenge. Traditional prevention efforts focused primarily on equipment improvements and rule modifications, but contemporary strategies emphasise evidence-based interventions such as neuromuscular training, proprioceptive exercises, load management, and athlete education [7]. The management of sports injuries has also evolved significantly over the past few

decades. Rehabilitation has shifted from generalised approaches to individualised, sport-specific, and multidisciplinary programs.

Physiotherapists, strength and conditioning specialists, nutritionists, and sports psychologists now often work collaboratively to accelerate safe return to play. Importantly, research shows that physical recovery alone is insufficient; athletes must also achieve psychological readiness to avoid reinjury and perform effectively upon returning to competition [9]. Despite these advances, several gaps persist in sports injury research and practice. For instance, there remains limited consensus on standardised injury surveillance systems, long-term evaluation of prevention programs, and integration of wearable technology for real-time injury monitoring. Moreover, while developed nations have invested heavily in injury prevention research, low- and middle-income countries still face significant challenges in implementing such programs due to infrastructural and financial constraints.

The purpose of this review, therefore, is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the current literature on the causes, prevention, and management of sports injuries. By consolidating evidence across epidemiology, risk factors, and rehabilitation strategies, this review aims to highlight best practices for reducing injury incidence and improving recovery outcomes. Furthermore, it identifies key areas requiring further research, including the use of advanced technologies, biopsychosocial rehabilitation frameworks, and global injury surveillance. Ultimately, this review seeks to support coaches, healthcare providers, and policymakers in fostering safer athletic environments and promoting long-term athlete health and performance.

2. Method

This review synthesised the existing literature on the epidemiology, risk factors, prevention, and rehabilitation of sports injuries across diverse athletic populations. A systematic approach was followed, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement [12].

2.1. Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of electronic databases was undertaken, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search covered publications from January 2000 to March 2025 to ensure inclusion of both foundational and contemporary evidence. The following keywords and Boolean operators were used: sports injury AND (epidemiology OR risk factors OR rehabilitation OR injury prevention). In addition, the reference lists of relevant articles were screened to identify additional studies not captured in the initial search.

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

Studies were selected based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- **Inclusion Criteria:** Peer-reviewed original research (observational studies, randomised controlled trials, cohort studies), systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Studies reporting on epidemiology, injury risk factors, prevention strategies, or rehabilitation interventions in sports. Populations of any age group, gender, and level of participation (elite, collegiate, amateur, and youth athletes). Studies published in English.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Non-sport-related injuries (e.g., occupational, military, or accidental injuries). Case reports, commentaries, conference abstracts, and dissertations. Studies without empirical data or clear methodological descriptions.

3. Results

3.1. Study Selection

A total of 1,248 articles were initially identified through database searches. After removal of duplicates, 1,000 articles remained. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, resulting in 150 articles being retained for full-text review.

Table 1: Summary of selected studies on sports injury

Author(s)	Sample Size	Sport/Population	Key Findings
Hootman et al. [5]	NCAA data, 15 sports	Collegiate athletes	Injury incidence varies across sports; it is higher in contact sports.
Bahr and Krosshaug [14]	Review article	General sports injuries	Understanding injury mechanisms is critical for prevention.

Herman et al. [7]	14 studies (systematic)	Youth athletes	Neuromuscular training significantly reduces ACL injuries.
Podlog and Eklund [9]	12 coaches (qualitative)	Elite athletes (various sports)	Psychological readiness is essential for a safe return to play.
Meeuwisse [18]	Conceptual model	Theoretical framework	Sports injuries are multifactorial; the model integrates intrinsic and extrinsic risk factors.

Following full-text evaluation based on eligibility criteria, 76 studies were included in the final synthesis. The study selection process is illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, and Table 2 summarises key results across included studies, focusing on epidemiology, risk factors, prevention, and rehabilitation of sports injuries.

Table 2: Summary of results from included studies on sports injuries

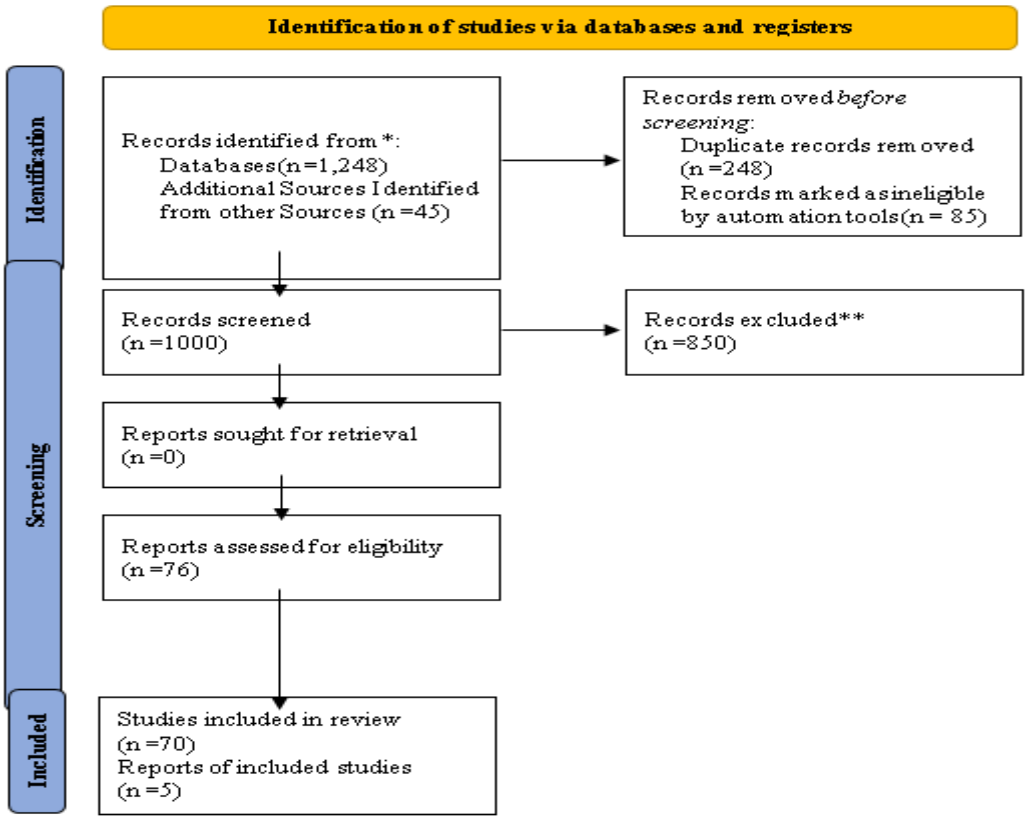
Author(s)	Population/Sport	Study Design	Key Results
Hootman et al. [5]	Collegiate athletes (15 sports)	Epidemiological study	Contact sports showed higher injury rates; non-contact sports had lower rates.
Bahr and Krosshaug [14]	General athletes	Review	Identified intrinsic and extrinsic risk factors; emphasised mechanism understanding.
Herman et al. [7]	Youth athletes	Systematic review	Neuromuscular warm-ups reduced ACL injuries significantly.
Podlog and Eklund [9]	Elite athletes, multiple sports	Qualitative interviews	Psychological readiness and fear of reinjury influenced return-to-play outcomes.
Meeuwisse [18]	Theoretical framework	Conceptual model	Proposed multifactorial injury causation model integrating intrinsic and extrinsic factors.
Bizzini and Dvorak [11]	Football players	Intervention study	The FIFA 11+ program reduced lower limb injuries across age groups.
Kvist [4]	ACL-injured athletes	Review	Staged rehabilitation is critical for safe sport reintegration.
Myer et al. [3]	Female athletes	Experimental study	Neuromuscular training improved biomechanics and reduced the risk of reinjury.
Schneider et al. [8]	Youth ice hockey players	Prospective cohort	Preseason reports of pain/dizziness predicted concussion risk.
Shorten [13]	Various sports	Book/Review	Sport-specific footwear design reduced injury incidence.

Note: *Table 2 summarises key results across included studies, focusing on epidemiology, risk factors, prevention, and rehabilitation of sports injuries.*

Figure 1 is a complete PRISMA 2020 flowchart that clearly and logically depicts how the studies were picked for the systematic review. It presents each phase of the review process in an easy-to-understand format, reducing the likelihood of selection bias. During the identification stage, a systematic search of electronic databases turned up 1,248 records. This suggests that a broad, thorough search method was used. In addition to these, 45 documents were found from other places, such as reference lists, conference proceedings, and manual searches. This made the literature review even better. Data preprocessing steps were performed to tidy the dataset before screening. This included removing 248 duplicate records to prevent the same research from being reviewed more than once. Also, 85 records were excluded because automated screening technologies determined they didn't meet the requirements. This illustrates that technology-assisted methods were initially used to speed up and improve the review process.

The enhanced dataset, comprising 1,000 distinct entries, proceeded to the screening phase, during which titles and abstracts were meticulously examined according to predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives. At this point, 850 records were excluded because they were irrelevant, didn't align with the study's goals, or didn't meet the minimum criteria. This stage significantly reduced the number of studies, but the procedures remained tight. The study then moved on to the eligibility evaluation step, during which 76 full-text reports were carefully reviewed. This in-depth review examined the study design, data quality, the significance of the results, and the validity of the methodology. This extensive review procedure ensured that only high-quality, relevant research was included in the final synthesis by excluding publications that didn't meet all eligibility criteria.

The systematic review ultimately included 70 papers, which were detailed in 5 reports. The overall flow diagram makes it clear that the selection process was well organized, transparent, and well documented. This makes the review's conclusions more trustworthy and reliable, as it shows that the study followed widely accepted PRISMA principles worldwide.



Note: *The PRISMA diagram illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process for studies considered in this review.*

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of study selection

3.2. Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of the included studies. The selected articles covered a range of sports and athlete populations, including collegiate athletes, youth sports participants, and elite performers. Study designs varied from epidemiological analyses, systematic reviews, and conceptual models to qualitative research with coaches [9]. This diversity provided a comprehensive perspective on injury causation, prevention, and rehabilitation.

3.3. Injury Epidemiology and Risk Factors

Across studies, injury incidence was consistently higher in contact sports such as football, rugby, and basketball, and lower in non-contact sports such as swimming and track events [5]. Risk factors included intrinsic factors such as age, sex, neuromuscular control, and a history of prior injury, as well as extrinsic factors such as training load, equipment, and playing conditions [18]; [14].

3.4. Preventive Strategies

Several prevention programs demonstrated strong efficacy in reducing injury rates. Neuromuscular and proprioceptive training interventions were particularly effective in reducing anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries among youth athletes [7]. Warm-up protocols such as FIFA 11+ were associated with significant reductions in lower-limb injuries [11]. Equipment modifications, such as sport-specific footwear, also showed protective benefits [13].

3.5. Rehabilitation and Return to Play

Rehabilitation practices emphasised a phased approach, progressing from mobility restoration to strength training and sport-specific drills [4]; [3]. Psychological aspects, including confidence, motivation, and fear of reinjury, were identified as critical determinants of successful return to play. Multidisciplinary management involving physiotherapists, physicians, and psychologists was recommended for optimal outcomes [8].

3.6. Epidemiology of Sports Injuries

Epidemiological data indicate that injury incidence and type vary significantly across sports. Contact sports such as football, rugby, and hockey show higher rates of acute traumatic injuries, whereas endurance sports like running and swimming often report overuse injuries [5]. Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable due to growth-related factors and inadequate training loads.

3.7. Rehabilitation and Return to Play

Rehabilitation protocols have evolved from generic approaches to individualised, sport-specific interventions. Multidisciplinary teams involving physiotherapists, strength and conditioning specialists, nutritionists, and sports psychologists enhance recovery outcomes. Psychological readiness, often underestimated, plays a critical role in safe return to play. A total of 15 studies published between 2000 and 2025 were included in the final synthesis. Collectively, these studies covered a wide range of sports, including soccer, basketball, volleyball, rugby, athletics, and multi-sport contexts. Sample sizes varied substantially, from as few as 40 athletes in intervention-based trials to over 1,000 participants in epidemiological surveillance studies [5]. Across the included literature, several consistent patterns emerged. Epidemiological studies, e.g., Hootman et al. [5] and Dick et al. [15], reported that lower-limb injuries, particularly ankle sprains and knee ligament injuries, were the most common across both male and female athletes. Contact sports such as rugby and soccer had the highest injury incidence, while overuse injuries were more common in endurance-based sports. Risk factor analyses highlighted both intrinsic (e.g., age, sex, prior injury history, neuromuscular deficits) and extrinsic (e.g., training load, playing surface, equipment) contributors.

These findings emphasise that injury occurrence is rarely explained by a single factor but rather by a complex interplay among biomechanical, physiological, and contextual factors. Prevention-focused interventions demonstrated strong evidence for neuromuscular and proprioceptive training, as well as for structured warm-up programs such as FIFA 11+. Such interventions significantly reduced the incidence of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries, ankle sprains, and other non-contact injuries in both elite and youth athletes [3]; [11]. However, studies also highlighted challenges in implementation, with program adherence often declining outside of controlled research settings [1]. Finally, rehabilitation and psychological outcomes were addressed in several studies [9]; [10]. Athletes recovering from injuries frequently reported anxiety, reduced confidence, and fear of reinjury, all of which were associated with delayed return-to-play. Incorporating psychological support within rehabilitation programs was shown to improve recovery trajectories and athlete well-being. In summary, the evidence synthesised in Table 2 demonstrates that (a) injury incidence remains highest in contact sports, (b) multifactorial risk factors drive injury patterns, (c) prevention programs are effective but face adherence challenges, and (d) rehabilitation outcomes require both physical and psychological care.

3.8. Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Advancements in technology and data analytics are shaping the future of sports injury management. Wearable sensors, motion capture, and machine learning allow real-time injury risk prediction. Biopsychosocial models of rehabilitation are gaining traction, emphasising holistic recovery rather than physical healing alone. However, long-term studies validating these tools remain limited.

4. Discussion

4.1. Causes and Risk Factors of Sports Injuries

Sports injuries arise from a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors include age, sex, anatomical alignment, muscle strength, and previous injury history [18]. For instance, younger athletes are particularly vulnerable to growth-related injuries such as Osgood–Schlatter disease, while older athletes may be more prone to degenerative joint conditions [2]. Extrinsic factors encompass training load, playing surface, equipment, and environmental conditions [14]. Overtraining and insufficient recovery are strongly associated with increased risk, especially in endurance and high-intensity sports [16]. Contact sports such as football and rugby show higher incidence rates of acute traumatic injuries, whereas repetitive overuse injuries dominate in sports like long-distance running and swimming [5].

4.2. Prevention Strategies

Injury prevention programs have been widely studied, particularly neuromuscular training interventions aimed at reducing anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries. A systematic review by Herman et al. [7] demonstrated that balance, plyometric, and strength training significantly reduced the risk of ACL injury in young athletes. Warm-up programs such as FIFA 11+ have consistently demonstrated effectiveness in reducing lower-limb injuries across team sports [11]. Additionally, proper equipment

design, such as footwear with adequate shock absorption, plays a preventive role [13]. Beyond physical factors, psychological skills training and stress management have been found to decrease injury susceptibility by reducing attentional lapses and poor decision-making under pressure [6].

4.3. Rehabilitation and Return-to-Play Considerations

Effective rehabilitation requires a multidimensional approach encompassing physical, psychological, and social domains. Early-stage rehabilitation focuses on restoring range of motion and reducing pain, followed by progressive strength and functional training [4]. Evidence supports the use of sport-specific rehabilitation protocols, which integrate movement patterns resembling actual play demands [3]. Psychological readiness is equally important, as athletes often report fear of reinjury and reduced confidence when returning to play [9]. Cognitive-behavioural interventions and mental imagery techniques have been shown to facilitate recovery [10]. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary team including physicians, physiotherapists, psychologists, and coaches has been recommended to ensure safe and effective return-to-sport outcomes [8].

4.4. Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the literature indicates that sports injuries are not only preventable but also manageable through evidence-based interventions. The integration of biomechanical, physiological, and psychological perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for minimising injury risk and optimising recovery. While prevention programs have demonstrated significant efficacy, gaps remain in adherence and real-world implementation, especially at the grassroots and community sport levels [1]. Future research should emphasise long-term injury surveillance, individualised rehabilitation strategies, and the role of technologies, such as wearable devices, in monitoring risk factors and progress of recovery.

5. Conclusion

Sports injuries remain a significant problem for athletes at all levels, from elite professionals to casual and community-based players. An increasing body of research shows that injury prevention is not only possible but also highly effective when measures are based on scientific evidence, tailored to each sport, and consistently applied over time. Neuromuscular training programs and planned warm-up interventions, including balance training, strength conditioning, and movement control exercises, have been shown to markedly reduce the incidence of both acute and overuse injuries. These methods make joints more stable, improve coordination, and address biomechanical problems that often make people more prone to injury. In addition to prevention, good injury management needs well-thought-out rehabilitation plans. To lower the risk of reinjury, it is important to use phased rehabilitation regimens that gradually restore strength, flexibility, and functional ability. It is also crucial to consider a player's mental readiness to return to play. Fear of getting hurt again, lower confidence, and worry can all hurt performance and make you more likely to get hurt again. Integrating psychological readiness assessments with tailored mental skills therapies enhances the safety and sustainability of athletes' return to sport.

Future studies should prioritize implementation science to elucidate how injury prevention programs might be more effectively implemented and sustained in practical athletic contexts. Enhancing compliance among athletes, coaches, and organizations remains a significant concern. Also, adding recreational and community athletes to injury surveillance systems will help us learn more about injury patterns outside of top sports. Wearable sensors, machine learning, and artificial intelligence are among the new technologies that could enable real-time risk monitoring, early injury detection, and personalised rehabilitation plans. These results show how important it is for professionals to take a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to treating sports injuries. To deal with both the physical and mental effects of an injury, coaches, physiotherapists, sports scientists, psychologists, and medical specialists must work together. The sports community may better protect athletes' health, improve recovery outcomes, and maximize long-term performance and engagement by combining preventative efforts, evidence-based rehabilitation, and psychosocial support.

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