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Concerns grow over NFL player's death

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When Chris Henry died on Dec. 17, 2009 after falling from a moving pickup truck the previous day while in an argument with his fiance, who was driving the truck, it was considered a circumstance of terribly bad luck. But a forensic examination of Henry's brain by scientists at the Brain Injury Research Institute in West Virginia shows that his death might have stemmed from his career as an NFL wide receiver.



The ESPN.com report earlier today that Henry, formerly of the Cincinnati Bengals, suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is particularly troubling. It's a form of degenerative brain damage caused by multiple hits to the head. The condition derived from his brain's large buildup of tau, which is a toxic protein that can cause depression, memory loss and irrational behavior.

Since repeated hits to the head are the only known cause of CTE, researchers can't dispel the possibility that Henry's past volatile behavior -- he was arrested several times for domestic violence, substance abuse and gun charges -- could've been due in part to the hits he took as a football player.

Henry's case is the latest example in a long line of professional athletes, particularly former NFL players, who've been diagnosed with CTE. More than 50 deceased athletes have been found to have had the condition. Few have been younger than Henry.

"This is an important finding in the fact that it's occurring in individuals who are much younger," said Dr. Christopher Giza, Associate Professor of Pediatric Neurology and Neurosurgery at UCLA.

While Giza cautioned that Henry's death might not be an absolute result from his brain's apparent degenerative state, he stated it is unusual for such a young person to have such a large buildup of tau. Unfortunately, there might not be a way to discover an athlete's tau buildup until a tragic event unfolds.

"The big problem is we don't have a way of detecting tau in a living brain," Giza said.

He was adamant during a phone conversation that it is critical to do more research before jumping to the conclusion that deaths such as Henry's are a result only from repetitive hits to the head. Some people might be more predisposed to psychological problems or other conditions. High school and college athletes might be even more negatively affected by hits to the head given their developing brains.

Attention to the topic of CTE can be compromised if people inaccurately correlate a traumatic injury, or even death, strictly to a player's CTE without the proper medical research, Giza implored. Still, Henry's case is an eye-opener.

The NFL has been criticized, and rightly so, for taking so long to warm up to the idea that their players might suffer from traumatic head injuries at such young ages. In the case of BIRI's findings on Henry, the league didn't have much to say when I contacted them.

"Our medical advisors have received no information about the Chris Henry findings," wrote Brian McCarthy, the NFL's Vice President of Corporate Communications, in an e-mail message.

McCarthy noted that the NFL has invested \$1 million in CTE research with the Boston University group. The league also has a concussion committee to study the physical and emotional effects concussions have on players' short- and long-term health.