

Big league baseball a grand slam for players' life expectancy

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The prospect of standing in to face a rock hard, leather-covered sphere hurtling toward you at 100 mph on a daily basis hardly seems like the formula for a long life.

Yet as the nation turns its eyes to baseball's fall classic this week, there's a new reason for the players who wind up on the losing end of the World Series to find solace. Not only does the average big leaguer get paid \$4 million-plus a year, but he's also likely to live a lot longer than the average American man.

Major league baseball players have lower death rates overall, and lower rates of many underlying causes of death, compared with men in the general U.S. population. That's according to a research letter published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, co-written by researchers from Harvard and Massachusetts General Hospital. The study of 10,451 baseball players who debuted in the major leagues from 1906 to 2006 includes differences in mortality rates by position and career length.

Fit for life off the diamond

The study indicates that over the century-long period the big league ballplayers examined died at 77.1 years old on average, living 12.6 years longer than the average American man. These differences, the study's authors postulated, could be associated in part with the physical fitness required for a career in the major leagues.

Players in the sample had lower mortality risks for the four leading causes of death in the United States today—cardiovascular disease, cancer, unintentional injury and respiratory disease. The study did show some higher mortality risks for certain types of cancers, such as skin cancer, which is linked to more sun exposure. The study did not explore ballplayers' access to health care such as mental health services.

An invited commentary by epidemiologist John W. Waterbor, MD, DrPH, and Major League Baseball's Glenn Felsig, PhD, points out that those numbers may be a point of interest considering the "largest deficit in observed deaths between players and the U.S. population was from suicide."

They noted that "protective factors against suicide in older white men are connectedness to family, community and friends, as well as physical health, all of which may be characteristic of baseball players and retirees."

Double-play combos live longest

In terms of a mortality breakdown of baseball players by position, shortstops and second basemen lived the longest. Meanwhile, catchers—who don the "tools of ignorance" to play the sport's most physically demanding position—had the shortest lifespans.

Catchers showed an increased risk in genitourinary tract disease-related mortality. The study also pointed to body type. Catchers are typically a bit stockier, while middle infielders are frequently leaner.

Hard hit for NFL's health prospects

Another study published earlier this year, in *JAMA Network Open*, found that major leaguers had a lower rate of all-cause mortality compared with their National Football League (NFL) counterparts. NFL players had 26% higher mortality, with significant increased mortality from cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases.