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Returning Women to Sport and Exercise: Overcoming Challenges Across Life Stages

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Sport, exercise and physical activity are vital for women's health and wellbeing, yet returning to these activities following injury, postpartum, and through ageing, can be challenging (1–3). There has been an ongoing fight for women to be treated the same as men, including the battle for equal pay, respect, access, and media coverage. However, there is a growing demand, fuelled by an increase in the understanding of the psychological, sociological and physiological characteristics of women, to acknowledge gender differences, so that women can be more effectively supported, and disparities in physical activity between genders can be mitigated.

As the popularity of female sport increases, the incidence of injury has become more apparent. In gender comparable sports, female injury rates are significantly higher than their male counterparts (4,5). There is still a lack of understanding of the causes of increased injury rates in women's sport, although some have argued that these injury risk calculations may be biased (5).

In this special edition, we highlight a scoping review examining the implications of sociocultural constructs and sensorimotor control for anterior cruciate injury (bjsports-2024-108617), a consensus statement for the management of knee cartilage injuries in football players (bjsports-2024-108960) and original research into sport-specific concomitant injuries, return-to-sport rates and second ACL injuries in adolescents with ACL reconstruction (bjsports-2024-108694). Each of these articles refers to women in sport and has a crucial role in addressing the gender imbalance in sports injury research, which has traditionally focused predominantly on male athletes.

Women's return to sport is influenced by a range of female-specific health considerations that are often overlooked in traditional sports medicine frameworks. Factors such as hormonal fluctuations throughout the menstrual cycle, pelvic floor health, pregnancy and childbirth, and the transition through menopause can all impact physical readiness, recovery timelines, and overall performance. These conditions can influence a women's physical and emotional capacity, making a one-size-fits-all approach to treatment, rehabilitation and training insufficient. As more women participate in sport at all levels, it is essential that research, coaching, and clinical practices evolve to better understand and support the unique physiological experiences of female athletes, throughout the different stages of their lives.

This is further explored in an editorial on how pelvic floor dysfunction in female athletes can be addressed and managed (see page 889). Women returning to sport and exercise after injury, or maintaining their activity levels through ageing, face unique challenges that require a holistic approach (1–3). Sport and Exercise Therapists play a crucial role in this process by understanding the interconnectedness of psychological, sociological, and physiological factors. They are trained to provide comprehensive, person-centred assessments and support that considers not only musculoskeletal health, but also the emotional and social determinants of health. The Society of Sports Therapists (SST) advocates for comprehensive, person-centred approaches that consider the biopsychosocial factors. For instance, therapists should recognise that hormonal changes, such as those experienced during the menstrual cycle or menopause, can impact physical performance, recovery and mental well-being. By tailoring interventions to address these specific needs, Sport and Exercise Therapists can help women navigate the complexities of effectively returning to physical activity. This personalised approach not only facilitates physical recovery but also supports mental resilience, ensuring that women can confidently and sustainably reintegrate into their sport and exercise routines.

Women returning to sport and exercise often find that the therapeutic relationship with Sport and Exercise Therapists is a vital part of their recovery journey. These therapists provide empathetic support, which helps to strengthen women's social support network. This nurturing environment greatly enhances mental health, which is essential for an effective return to activity. The SST emphasises a comprehensive approach, and by addressing both physical and psychological needs, therapists can

help women achieve their desired return to sport and exercise. The specific focus on the biopsychosocial characteristics of women, and how they differ from their male counterparts is essential if the gender inequalities in physical activity is to be addressed.

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