

# BRAIN HEALTH

# AND CONCUSSION

A practical plan that empowers everyone in rugby to play their part in promoting player safety and reducing the risk of concussion.

**2026-2027**



## VISION

**Everyone in rugby plays their part to promote player safety and reduce the risk of concussion.**

## INTRODUCTION

New Zealand Rugby (NZR), the New Zealand Rugby Players Association (RPA), and the New Zealand Rugby Foundation (NZRF) have developed this plan to support everyone in rugby to play their part to prevent and manage concussion.

## BACKGROUND

As a contact sport, rugby carries inherent risk. Managing this risk is central to reducing concussion harm.

Concussion risk varies by age and level of play, generally increasing in community rugby as players progress through the game. Professional competitions report higher rates, reflecting the intensity of play and improved injury identification.

Managing risk does not mean eliminating injury. It means making sure that all reasonable steps are taken to reduce how often injuries occur, and how severe they are. A key part of this is ensuring players, coaches, and whānau are informed, supported, and equipped to play their part to promote player safety and reduce the risk of concussion. The plan below outlines the measures NZR, NZRPA, and the NZRF are taking to manage the risks of concussion and other injuries across rugby in New Zealand.

## OUR PARTNERS

NZR, RPA, and NZRF work collaboratively to share information, review progress, and strengthen delivery. Each organisation has distinct responsibilities:

- [New Zealand Rugby](#) leads, supports, and promotes rugby from the community game to the professional level, creating safe and welcoming environments for all
- [New Zealand Rugby Players Association](#) represents and supports professional players, advocating for their welfare, safety, and rights
- [New Zealand Rugby Foundation](#) provides independent, lifelong support for players whose lives are changed by serious rugby injury.

This plan is supported by key partners including ACC, Provincial Unions, Super Rugby clubs, clubs, schools, medical providers, and World Rugby. These organisations play an essential role in ensuring players are informed, supported, and protected.

## THE PLAN

The plan is organised into five focus areas. Each has a clear objective and practical initiatives to support our rugby communities.



### EDUCATION & TRAINING



### INJURY PREVENTION



### INJURY MANAGEMENT



### RESEARCH & MONITORING



### POLICIES, LAWS & REGULATIONS

All focus areas and initiatives are supported by:

- **Culturally responsive delivery** that meets the diverse needs of our communities through inclusive, respectful, and culturally safe practice
- **Clear communication and engagement** that provides stakeholders with timely, transparent communication
- **Connected and coordinated delivery** across the system, with clear roles and responsibilities at each stage of the player journey



## EDUCATION & TRAINING

**Objective:** Stakeholders are fully informed about the risks, causes, and effects of concussion and take active steps to promote player safety and mitigate this risk.

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
<b>Small Blacks Training (with Tackle &amp; Scrum Modules)</b>	Mandatory coach education that develops safe, age-appropriate rugby skills to reduce injury risk.	NZR	Community coaches (U13)	Apr - Sept
<b>First Aid in Rugby (FAIR)</b>	Build confident first responders who can recognise and manage suspected concussion.	NZR	Community coaches and volunteers	Feb - Jul
<b>Warm Up in Rugby</b>	Reduce injury-risk through evidence-based exercises that improve stability for contact.	NZR	Female participants	Ongoing
<b>Contact Ready</b>	Give teenage girls the confidence and core skills needed to participate safely.	NZR	Teenage girls	Feb - April
<b>Professional Player Concussion Education</b>	Deliver consistent brain health and concussion education via Super Rugby induction and annual refreshers to reinforce protocols and standards.	NZR & RPA	Professional players	Induction (Jan) and ongoing

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
Medical Education Programme (ICIR)	Standardise and strengthen pitch side care, including acute concussion management.	NZR	Physiotherapists and Medical Practitioners	May - Jun
Annual Rugby Medical Meetings	Keep professional team medical staff up to date on concussion.	NZR	Professional team medical staff	Ongoing
Education and Support for Retired Players	Support retired players to understand, protect, and manage their brain health following their involvement in rugby.	NZR & RPA	Retired professional and community players	Ongoing



## INJURY PREVENTION

**Objective:** Best practice, research-informed injury prevention programmes that promote player safety and reduce the severity and incidence of concussion.

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
RugbySmart	Mandatory training (U14+) that promotes safe, effective coaching behaviours to reduce concussion risk.	NZR	Community coaches and referees	Feb - May
Shape-of-Game Improvements	Trial and implement game and law innovations that reduce concussion risk.	NZR	Community rugby; professional rugby	Mar - Oct
Non-Contact Variants	Develop and trial non-contact formats to broaden participation options and lower exposure to head-contact.	NZR	Community rugby	Apr - Sept
Player Load Guidelines	Use instrumented mouthguard data to inform safe player load guidelines.	NZR	Professional rugby	Feb - Nov



## INJURY MANAGEMENT

**Objective:** Fit-for-purpose support systems and processes that promote player safety at all levels of the game.

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
Blue Card and Community Concussion Reporting	Ensure players with suspected concussion are removed from play and supported through clear reporting and follow up processes.	NZR	Community rugby	Apr - Aug

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
<b>Advocate Use of Other Health Professionals</b>	Improve timely access to assessment and clearance by widening the range of approved providers.	NZR	ACC	Ongoing
<b>Clinical Guidelines and Graduated Return to Play</b>	Provide consistent, evidence-based pathways including holistic return-to-play plans.	NZR	Coaches, medical staff, players	Ongoing
<b>Very Injured Player Support</b>	Coordinate guidance, funding, and peer support for seriously injured players.	NZRF	Seriously injured players	Ongoing
<b>Near Miss and Accident Support</b>	Provide response and support for every reported serious rugby injury.	NZRF	All players	Ongoing
<b>ACC Claims and Support</b>	Provide timely assistance and support for players under NZR's Accredited Employer Programme with ACC.	NZR & RPA	Professional Players	Ongoing
<b>Psychological Support Following Concussion</b>	Ensure timely access to psychological support pathways for players experiencing post-concussion mental health impacts/symptoms, including mental health screening, EAP support, and external referral options.	NZR	Professional Players	Ongoing
<b>NZR/RPA Benevolent Welfare</b>	Support professional players who must retire due to injury with welfare and transition assistance.	RPA	Professional players	Ongoing
<b>World Rugby Brain Health Service</b>	Provide access to expert neurological assessments, cognitive testing, and personalised care plans.	NZR & RPA	Professional players	Ongoing
<b>Brain Health Exit Assessments</b>	Establish each player's brain health status when they exit professional rugby.	RPA	Professional players	Ongoing
<b>Concussion Practitioner Network</b>	Improve access to practitioners to help support retired professional players.	NZR & RPA	Professional players	Ongoing

## RESEARCH AND MONITORING



**Objective:** Lead and apply high quality research that informs strategy and initiatives, promoting player safety and strengthening concussion risk management.

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
World Rugby Injury Surveillance Project	Identify injury and load trends to improve player safety decisions.	NZR	Professional teams, medical staff	Annually
Community Rugby ACC Concussion Claims	Monitor concussion rates to target prevention and support community rugby.	ACC/NZR	Provincial Unions, clubs	Annually
Instrumented Mouthguards (iMGs)	Understand head-impact loads to inform safer training and play.	NZR	Coaches, medical staff	Ongoing
Modified Head Impact Assessment - Farah Palmer Cup	Improve identification and management of potential concussions.	NZR	FPC teams, medical staff	Aug - Oct
Collaborative Brain Health Research and Evidence	Collaborate with external partners on emerging and longitudinal research, applying independent insights to inform strategy and initiatives.	NZR / NZRF / RPA	Stakeholders, researchers, players	Ongoing
Performance Reporting	Track consistent metrics to evaluate concussion-related progress.	NZR	All stakeholders	Ongoing
Investigate Serious/Near Miss Incidents	Learn from incidents to prevent recurrence and improve safety.	NZRF	Clubs, Unions, medical staff, players	Ongoing



## POLICIES, LAWS & REGULATIONS

**Objective:** Uphold and strengthen evidence-informed policies, laws and regulations to promote player safety, reduce concussion risk, and ensure safe rugby environments.

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
Participation Policies	Ensure players take part in safe and appropriate environments through age/weight banding, minimum rest, minutes limits, and mandatory mouthguards.	NZR	Community players, coaches, referees,	Ongoing
Domestic Safety Law Variations	Apply approved and experimental safety law variations to reduce head contact risk and enhance player safety beyond the core World Rugby laws.	NZR	Community and professional rugby	Seasonal

WHAT	PURPOSE	LEAD	AUDIENCE	WHEN
<b>World Rugby Head Injury Assessment (HIA)</b>	Support consistent identification, diagnosis, and management of head impact events with potential for concussion.	NZR & RPA	Professional competitions, medical staff, referees	In Season
<b>World Rugby Coaching Intervention Programme</b>	Incentivise improved tackle technique and safer behaviours to reduce head contact risk.	NZR & RPA	Professional players and coaches	In Season
<b>World Rugby Contact Load Guidelines</b>	Provide guidance for safe contact-training volumes to reduce injury risk and protect player welfare.	NZR & RPA	Professional coaches and performance staff	Ongoing
<b>World Rugby Head Contact Process</b>	Apply sanction-based processes to protect the head, neck, and throat and reduce dangerous contact in game.	NZR & RPA	All levels of rugby, referees, judicial staff	In Season
<b>Player Insurance (Community)</b>	Offer catastrophic injury insurance to ensure financial protection and long-term support for community players.	NZR	Community players	Ongoing
<b>Player Insurance (Professional)</b>	Provide insurance for professional players experiencing career impacting injuries or major life events.	NZR & RPA	Professional players	Ongoing

## HOW WE MEASURE SUCCESS

Each year, we report on a set of measures to understand how effectively the plan supports everyone in rugby to promote player safety, strengthen brain health outcomes, and reduce the risk of concussion. These measures support transparency, track impact, and ensure actions remain practical and evidence based.

AREA	MEASURES	PROGRESS INDICATORS
<b>Education &amp; Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likelihood of professional players reporting a suspected concussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Reporting behaviour</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentage of coaches completing Rugby Smart and Small Blacks qualifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Baseline established through Rugby Xplorer</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likelihood of community players intervening when they see signs of concussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Intervention behaviour</li> </ul>
<b>Injury Prevention</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality and completeness of professional rugby concussion surveillance data (NZR contracted)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Accuracy of surveillance data</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Average cost per approved ACC concussion claim</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↓ Average claim cost (adjusted for inflation)</li> </ul>
<b>Injury Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compliance with professional rugby medical education requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>↑ Compliance year-on-year</li> </ul>

AREA	MEASURES	PROGRESS INDICATORS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual number of First Aid in Rugby (FAIR) trained medics in community rugby</li> </ul>	12 courses and 180 certified medics
<b>Research &amp; Monitoring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality and timeliness of surveillance and monitoring data</li> </ul>	↑ Completeness and timeliness of data
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Application of research insights to programme or law improvements</li> </ul>	↑ Evidence applied to decisions
<b>Policies, Laws &amp; Regulations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compliance with NZR participation and safety law requirements</li> </ul>	↑ Compliance with participation and safety law standards
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adherence to World Rugby HIA and Head Contact processes</li> </ul>	↑ Compliance with HIA and Head Contact processes



**RPA**

NEW ZEALAND  
RUGBY PLAYERS  
ASSOCIATION

