

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



RUGBY FOUNDATION

RPA

NEW ZEALAND
RUGBY PLAYERS
ASSOCIATION



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.

A junior rugby player, aged between 5-13 years, would have to play on average 750 games to expect a concussion (50 seasons)

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 |
|--|--|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Small Blacks Training (with Tackle & Scrum Modules) | Mandatory coach education that develops safe, age-appropriate rugby skills to reduce injury risk. | NZR | Community coaches (U13) | Apr - Sept |
| First Aid in Rugby (FAIR) | Build confident first responders who can recognise and manage suspected concussion. | NZR | Community coaches and volunteers | Feb - Jul |
| Warm Up in Rugby | Reduce injury-risk through evidence-based exercises that improve stability for contact. | NZR | Female participants | Ongoing |
| Contact Ready | Give teenage girls the confidence and core skills needed to participate safely. | NZR | Teenage girls | Feb - April |
| Professional Player Concussion Education | 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 |
|---|--|-----------|---------------------------------|---------|
| Advocate Use of Other Health Professionals | Improve timely access to assessment and clearance by widening the range of approved providers. | NZR | ACC | Ongoing |
| Clinical Guidelines and Graduated Return to Play | Provide consistent, evidence-based pathways including holistic return-to-play plans. | NZR | Coaches, medical staff, players | Ongoing |
| Very Injured Player Support | Coordinate guidance, funding, and peer support for seriously injured players. | NZRF | Seriously injured players | Ongoing |
| Near Miss and Accident Support | Provide response and support for every reported serious rugby injury. | NZRF | All players | Ongoing |
| ACC Claims and Support | Provide timely assistance and support for players under NZR's Accredited Employer Programme with ACC. | NZR & RPA | Professional Players | Ongoing |
| Psychological Support Following Concussion | 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 |
| NZR/RPA Benevolent Welfare | Support professional players who must retire due to injury with welfare and transition assistance. | RPA | Professional players | Ongoing |
| World Rugby Brain Health Service | Provide access to expert neurological assessments, cognitive testing, and personalised care plans. | NZR & RPA | Professional players | Ongoing |
| Brain Health Exit Assessments | Establish each player's brain health status when they exit professional rugby. | RPA | Professional players | Ongoing |
| Concussion Practitioner Network | 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 |
|--|---|-----------|--|-----------|
| World Rugby Head Injury Assessment (HIA) | Support consistent identification, diagnosis, and management of head impact events with potential for concussion. | NZR & RPA | Professional competitions, medical staff, referees | In Season |
| World Rugby Coaching Intervention Programme | Incentivise improved tackle technique and safer behaviours to reduce head contact risk. | NZR & RPA | Professional players and coaches | In Season |
| World Rugby Contact Load Guidelines | Provide guidance for safe contact-training volumes to reduce injury risk and protect player welfare. | NZR & RPA | Professional coaches and performance staff | Ongoing |
| World Rugby Head Contact Process | 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 |
| Player Insurance (Community) | Offer catastrophic injury insurance to ensure financial protection and long-term support for community players. | NZR | Community players | Ongoing |
| Player Insurance (Professional) | 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 |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Education & Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likelihood of professional players reporting a suspected concussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Reporting behaviour |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of coaches completing Rugby Smart and Small Blacks qualifications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baseline established through Rugby Xplorer |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likelihood of community players intervening when they see signs of concussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Intervention behaviour |
| Injury Prevention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality and completeness of professional rugby concussion surveillance data (NZR contracted) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Accuracy of surveillance data |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average cost per approved ACC concussion claim | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Average claim cost (adjusted for inflation) |
| Injury Management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance with professional rugby medical education requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Compliance year-on-year |

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



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