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Preventing golf injuries will make the game more enjoyable – until you hit the ball into the water

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When looking to unwind from our busy lifestyles, many of us head to the golf course to relax and enjoy some time outdoors. But without adequate preparation, physical problems can leave you stymied and looking for relief.

Golf isn't the first sport many think of as resulting in injuries, but pain and injuries can occur from the repetitive nature of the game and how various muscles are impacted by the swinging and hitting of the ball.

"Golf is a full-body sport," said Chris Fjosne, lead physical therapist at Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine in Minneapolis. "Every joint is affected in the golf swing, so your body can get injured anywhere. Most injuries are caused by overuse."

Fjosne said the most common injuries are to the:

Low back.

Elbow.

Shoulder.

Wrist.



One tool physical therapists use at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine facility in Minneapolis is a 2D video analysis of the golf swing, evaluating the swing from a biomechanical or medical perspective.

Hand.

Knee.

“Typically in a round of golf, even for good golfers, scores are in the 80s,” Fjosne said. “But you also have hitting from the range, chipping and putting and warm-up swings on the course, so you're performing a lot of repetitive actions on the golf course.”

Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine’s Dr. Jonathan Finnoff, a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician with subspecialty training in sports medicine, said many issues related to the back begin because golfers flex their trunk during their golf swing. “Golfers should keep their trunk straight and mainly flex at their hips, but it’s common for people to flex more in their trunk,” Finnoff said. “If golfers flex while they're trying to rotate, it can hurt their backs. That's one of the main predisposing features of getting back injuries.”

“Elite-level golfers tend to be fairly strong and have good technique, but they have a lot more repetitions and can get strength and flexibility imbalances,” Finnoff said. “The amateur golfer, or somebody who just goes out on the weekend, will have more technique errors, which can lead to injury. They also tend to strike the ground more frequently, which can cause injuries, particularly to wrists and hands. The best treatment for pain and injuries starts with prevention, so golfers need to prepare in the offseason.”

With proper preparation, golf injuries can be prevented through:

Strengthening.

Stretching.

Proper equipment.

Finnoff says golfers need strength in their hip girdle and core because that’s where they generate their power. The muscles in the back of their shoulders to help pull their shoulder blades back to reduce stress on their shoulders. Golfers should work on the rotational flexibility of their hips and trunk, and stretch their chest muscles and the muscles in the front of their shoulders.

To help prevent elbow, wrist and finger injuries, forearms can be strengthened by wrist curls or tennis ball squeezes.

Prior to starting a round, it's crucial to have an adequate warmup that includes cardio. "I give golfers an active warm-up routine that should take about 10 to 15 minutes before their round of golf," said Fjosne. "I encourage them to raise their heart rate during that timeframe. I want them to start to perspire so they're truly getting their joints warmed up. They can then progress into a walking or lateral lunges to loosen their hips, before moving into some putting, followed by chipping, and eventually driving."

Proper equipment makes a difference

Having the proper equipment is a key factor in preventing golf injuries. A club that is too short, for example, can adversely affect the golfer's posture and lead to back and hip pain. With a club that is too long, the golfer is apt to hit the ground, which can lead to elbow, wrist and hand injuries.

The material the clubs are made from is also a factor in injury cause and prevention. Steel shaft clubs have more weight than graphite shaft clubs and can create more vibration upon impact with the ball. This can lead to stress in the arms and upper body.

In choosing shoes, those with longer cleats can cause the feet to stick to the ground, resulting in more torque in the knees and hip. "It helps to have some give between your foot and the ground," said Finnoff, "so it would be helpful to have shoes with a shorter cleat."

Wearing a glove allows the golfer to maintain a better grip on the club without having to over-squeeze. This will help prevent elbow, forearm and hand injuries.

Once a golfer suffers an injury or is in frequent pain, typically, the best course of treatment is physical therapy. "We want to identify and correct their flexibility and strength imbalances, as well as correct any flaws in their golf swing that may be contributing to their injury," said Fjosne.

One tool physical therapists use at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine facility in Minneapolis is a 2D video analysis of the golf swing, evaluating the swing from a biomechanical or medical perspective. This helps the physical therapist develop a program with the best corrective exercises for the patient's problems. "A swing analysis is key because if they're swaying repetitively in an inappropriate manner,

they're going to break down and have problems," said Finnoff. "Most problems can be treated through correcting flexibility and strength asymmetries; ensuring adequate endurance; and correcting their swing pattern."

By taking advantage of off-season conditioning, pre-round warm-ups and use of the proper equipment, golfers can enjoy their rounds of golf with less risk of pain or injury.

Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine in Minneapolis offers a premier continuum of care that ranges from prevention and treatment to rehabilitation and performance enhancement whether you are a top athlete or an active individual. Learn more at <https://sportsmedicine.mayoclinic.org/>.

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