

Newsletter

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Save your Back, Improve Your Game

An onlooker may assume that the never-ending quest to put the little white ball into the cup calls upon little of the athleticism required by other warm-weather sports such as tennis or cycling.

Not true. Many avid golfers contort their bodies into oddly twisted postures, generating a great deal of torque—the twisting force that opens a bottle cap—on the back. Couple this motion with a bent-over stance, repeat 90 to 120 times over three or four hours, add the fatigue that comes with several miles of walking and you've got a good workout and a recipe for potential lower back trouble.

As America's love affair with the game continues to grow, chiropractors advocate taking a proactive approach that will prepare your body for many years of pain-free play. "Most golfers go until they get hurt, then look for help," says Dr. David Stude, member of the American Chiropractic Association (ACA) Sports Council. "We advocate a different approach by helping patients look at what they can do right now to reduce the likelihood of future injury. We want people to be able to play without pain for a lifetime."

If you take this approach, you're in good company. According to Dr. Stude, Tiger Woods says that lifting weights and visiting his chiropractor regularly have made him a better golfer.

The American Chiropractic Association, along with Dr. Stude and Dr. Greg Rose, both founding fellows of the National Golf Fitness Society, suggest these tips to help protect your back and improve your game:

- Purchase equipment that fits. Don't try to adapt your swing to the wrong clubs: A six-footer playing with irons designed for someone five inches shorter is begging for back trouble.
- Take lessons. Learning proper swing technique is critical. At the end of the swing, you want to be standing straight up; the back should not be twisted. Players with poor swing technique tend to get frustrated, which leads to greater tension and increased risk of injury.
- Wear orthotics. These custom-made shoe inserts support the arch, absorb shock and increase coordination. "An orthotic can improve the entire body's balance and stability, which translates into a smoother swing," Dr. Rose says. While the upper part of a shoe may score style points, what the foot rests on affects your game.
- Avoid metal spikes. They tear up greens and can increase stress on the back. Soft shoes or soft spikes allow for greater motion.
- Warm up before each round. Take a brisk walk to get blood flowing to the muscles before stretching out. (To set up a stretching and/or exercise routine, see a doctor of chiropractic or golf pro who can evaluate your areas of tension and flexibility. No one set of stretches works for everyone.) Once you're loose, take 15-20 practice swings.
- Pull, don't carry, your golf bag. Carrying a heavy bag for 18 holes can cause the spine to shrink, leading to disk problems and nerve irritation. Walking the course is not only great exercise but also is a recommended tip for saving your back. If you prefer to ride in a cart, alternate riding and walking every other hole, bouncing around in a cart is hard on the spine.
- Keep your entire body involved. Every third hole, take a few practice swings with the opposite hand to keep your muscles balanced and even out stress on the back.

- Drink lots of water. Dehydration causes early fatigue, leading you to compensate by adjusting your swing, thus promoting injury risk. Don't smoke or drink while golfing, as both cause fluid loss.

Take the "drop." One bad swing striking a root or a rock with your club can damage a wrist. If unsure whether you can get a clean swing, take the drop.