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Fitness Preparation for the Golf Course

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Spring is in the air and summer on its way. If you are not already on the golf course I'm sure you are anticipating a fun, injury-free season. But remember, preparation is key.

All professional golfers have one thing in common - they all exercise. Golfers are at high risk for overuse injuries to muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints particularly low back, hip and shoulder. The better conditioned and stronger the golfer - the less susceptible to injury and quicker recovery. A golfer's best asset is a strong, flexible and stable body.

Hitting a golf ball consistently and effectively requires coordination, muscle control, strength and stamina. At least 32 major muscles are involved in a full swing (Myers 1995). These muscles must be used in the proper sequence and to the degree necessary to achieve a fluid yet effective swing.

In an interview with Golf Digest, Arnold Palmer complained of "loss of distance" as the first thing to go with his advancing age. Rotation is the dominant movement pattern during the swing and with age the most limiting. The point is, with exercise, rotational range of motion can be maintained and even increased, leading to greater distance.

Golf lessons will only improve technique if the body has the strength and flexibility to perform the necessary movements. Otherwise, the body is forced to compensate and struggle with a series of movements that strain and force it into an unhealthy pattern.

. The leg muscles (quadriceps, hamstrings and gluteals) play a major role, generating 80 percent of the golf swing's power (Myers 1995). The hips initiate movement down into the ball allowing the body to swivel, not sway, during the down swing, so they must be flexible. The back must be agile and rotate easily to reduce the strain on the shoulders through and after the impact. The midsection (abdominals, obloquies and erector spinae) will promote balance and stability throughout the golf swing as well as transfers force from the legs to the torso and is responsible for the swing acceleration. The upper torso (chest, back and shoulders) produces the actual swinging action and plays a big role in generating club head speed. Finally, the arms (biceps, triceps and forearm) control the accuracy of the club head on impact with the golf ball (Westcott 1997).

Golf demands a lot of bending, twisting and rotation. These kinds of movements are extremely stressful on the back. It's no wonder that back pain leads the list of golf

injuries. A strong set of abdominals must be engaged before lifting the arms into the back swing to protect the back from injury. Regular stretching of the tight hamstrings (back of the thighs) trunk rotators and hip flexors (front of the hips) will provide the flexibility needed to improve your swing.

Golfers must work on their game away from the course. The drive, which is ballistic and power oriented, can be performed more effectively, safely and forcefully by developing physical conditioning which complements these requirements. The club head speed and driving distance for example, can be increased with a non-specific strength and flexibility program. Additionally, injury potential can be reduced in the shoulder and back, as well as the hips, elbows and wrists by learning correct golf swing mechanics and by engaging in consistent and appropriate strength, flexibility and cardiovascular conditioning programs (Wescott 1997; Westcott, et al., 1996).

Smart and effective training progression should include the development of flexibility, stabilizing strength, muscular strength, power, activity specific movement drills and exercises, and a lot of time spent participating in the actual activity. A foundation of a basic balanced strength, cardiovascular and flexibility conditioning program should be in place before training higher-risk power, agility, ballistic or so called sports specific training.

Like any sport, warm-up before teeing off. Allow the body to get the feel and timing of the game before setting up for the first shot. Not only will it decrease your risk of injury, it may take a few strokes off your game!

Golf is a game of tempo, concentration and patience - add simple relaxation techniques and visualize your golf swing. Happy golfing!

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