

Back pain management

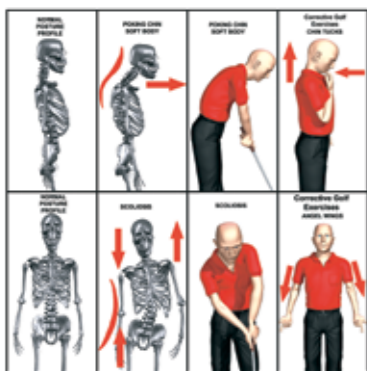
Ramsay McMaster, a world authority on golf-specific physiotherapy, explains how you can prolong your playing career by managing your back.

As a physiotherapist, I treat a lot of golfers with injuries. I would estimate that between 60 and 70 per cent of people who come into The Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic have back problems, which inhibit them from playing golf. However, I believe golf is one of the best activities for your back, provided that you are getting the proper coaching. It's poor technique and the repetition of hitting balls that leads to injury – not the golf swing. Combine that with a sedentary lifestyle (where people sit at a desk with a computer in a 'shutdown'

Ramsay's back checklist

1. Visit a physiotherapist for a golf-specific spinal and postural screening.
2. Take a lesson from a PGA professional about basic fundamentals and how the body sequences in a golf swing.
3. Also, ask the PGA professional to provide some drills that teach the right movements in your swing, which will take pressure off your back.
4. Get your swing on video or computer disc so you can see how poor body movements are going to cause damage to your spine.
5. Ensure your clubs are checked and fitted to suit your body shape e.g. are your clubs too short or long? Are the shafts too flexible or stiff?
6. Make sure you do a golf-specific warm-up routine prior to hitting balls.*
7. Build your golf "feels" in the warm-up.*
8. Ensure you get in the golf "zone" before swinging a club.*

* More on these next month



Your golf and posture test card.

position for most of the working day) and you begin to understand why there is such a high incidence of back pain among golfers.

A back injury eventuates from compression and excessive torsion of the spine, when the body does not function in the correct sequence during a golf swing. Eight times your body weight is forced through your spine as you reach impact. So if you have a suspect back and you're trying to carry that load, especially in the wrong impact position, then you are likely to cause yourself a lot of damage.

To avoid back pain, I recommend you start by visiting a physiotherapist for a golf-specific spinal and postural screening. A physio is able to identify skeletal and muscle imbalances and give you exercises to improve your posture. Correct posture and muscle balance will enable you to get into the positions required to swing the golf club properly.

Here's why. Understand that you're trying to set your body into a lateral-tilt position for the golf swing. That requires an adaptive posture, where your left shoulder is higher than your right (for right-handed golfers). It's an unnatural position for the spine and people with a sedentary lifestyle aren't fully prepared

to set themselves into that position. In all likelihood, their golf muscles have 'shut down' due to sitting for long periods.

Effectively, the muscles that absorb force and reduce load in a golf swing (that is, the lower and deep abdominals) are relatively weak



Andrew demonstrates an example of adaptive posture in the golf swing.

and aren't able to work together. And if your hips and shoulders are tight, there is a greater chance of sequencing incorrectly through your back. People say they hurt their back playing golf. No, they didn't rotate their body correctly in their swing.

The importance of 'sequencing' your swing

When a golfer tells me he has a bad back, I will suggest that he take a lesson from a golf professional. Often, he'll say, "I'm not good enough to see a pro." But you wouldn't drive a car without having had a driving lesson. And you wouldn't try the samba without having dance lessons. So why would you try and hit a golf ball without taking a lesson from a golf professional? A PGA professional is able to help by teaching you the correct fundamentals of the golf swing. Basically, you want the body to sequence correctly – that is, to rotate in the right places.

Think of the body in three sections – your upper body, trunk and lower legs. If they're not working in sequence, you're going to have a reaction to that movement. It's a bit like driving along the freeway in a four-wheel drive with a caravan attached. When you have disruption at speed you get a fishtail reaction and the caravan jack-knifes.

Everything gets out of sync and you have to react through the steering wheel. It feels like there is a lot of torsion and

Assess the handicap of your back

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Have you had a golf screening for your back?
Yes No | 6. Do you understand how to practice the same way as a Tour Pro would e.g. stretching after putting; short game before long game; dry drills before hitting full shots, etc.?
Yes No |
| 2. Do you do golf posture exercises and stretches to break up prolonged sitting e.g. computer work/driving?
Yes No | 7. Do you know the reasons why practising your putting and then hitting full drives can damage your back?
Yes No |
| 3. Do you do a golf specific warm-up before you play?
Yes No | 8. Have you had a golf lesson which concentrates on correct sequencing to reduce the stress on your spine?
Yes No |
| 4. Does your golf warm-up sequence and time your body for golf?
Yes No | 9. Do you know how to safely carry your golf clubs and push or pull your buggy?
Yes No |
| 5. Have your clubs been checked and fitted to your body?
Yes No | |

For every "No" you answered, score 4 points. Back Handicap: **36-28** Beware! Bad back is imminent. **28-20** Your back is under pressure. **20-8** Ensure you have a back program to prevent progression to the next handicap.

force going through the coupling and that's the same with the golf swing. When your upper body (chassis) and lower legs (caravan) aren't working together, you're going to have a lot of reaction through your back (coupling), which is prone to damage.

Take my self-assessment test (above) to assess the state of your back. The nine-part questionnaire

has a points system to indicate whether you are predisposed to back injury. You may have a handicap of 8, but you might discover your back is that of a 36-marker.

Phone The Melbourne Golf Injury Clinic on (03) 9569 9448 for your nearest golf-specific physiotherapist. For more information, visit www.golfmed.net.

FIT, ELITE AMATEURS such as Andrew Martin and Emma Bennett do corrective spinal exercises in their warm-up to prevent back injury. Why don't you?



Emma has good posture, while the skeletal model shows an example of poor posture.

Next month: Ramsay explains his five-minute warm-up routine for golf.