

The aging golfer

The wonderful thing about golf is that you can keep on playing year after year, long after you've stopped taking any other exercise and until you have to be practically wheeled onto the course. You might not play great golf but you can get out, get some exercise and play a few holes in a social setting. The bad thing about golf, being such an addictive sport, is that few golfers accept with good grace the limitations that increasing age and (dare I say it!) infirmity put on their performance. Add to this the problem of most recreational golfers not regarding golf as a sport really and you have a rather sad picture of an aging golfer who doesn't warm up or stretch, ignores what injuries occur until forced to stop, and who's getting increasingly frustrated by poor performance. This is not a person who's enjoying golf, and that's supposed to be the point of it all.

I'm going to look at the game of golf from the point of view of an older golfer and look at the golf swing can be affected by restrictions imposed by increasing age. Analyzing it in its most basic form, the golf swing is a controlled twisting of the trunk. One of the first movements to be lost in the spine as one gets older is that twisting movement. In older ladies who may have developed a bit of osteoporosis and a slight 'dowager's hump' movement is even more compromised. Stiffness in the neck also affects the swing, as it becomes very difficult to keep looking at the ball at the top of the backswing and even more difficult to turn into the follow through. The senior golfer will notice a reduced rotation on the back swing and follow through and will notice a decreased distance and accuracy of the ball when hit. Shoulder stiffness can mean that the senior golfer will start to overuse the trunk rotation in an attempt to compensate. Pain may be noted in the spine first whereas the stiff shoulder is actually the cause of the problem.

If there is actually an injury or pain, further difficulties can arise. Arthritis of the spine, hip or neck will always cause some stiffness, almost always cause pain and often swelling too. If the golfer is consciously or unconsciously trying to avoid pain, he or she often ends up changing the swing technique, leading to further overuse problems. An example would be a painful wrist, causing the golfer to cock the wrist incorrectly and predisposing towards golfer's elbow or tennis elbow. Pain also indirectly leads to muscle wasting as the person avoids painful activity and stops using certain muscles, which then start to waste. An example is wasting of one of the muscles of the low back, which happens with chronic low back pain. Good back muscles are vital to control club speed and trunk momentum from the top of the backswing onwards.

Also, as one gets older, the body tolerates a lot less. It's much more difficult to get away with being in one position for a long time without feeling stiffness or pain. This can happen with too much golf, such as prolonged putting or by excessive practice. This can also happen at home, for example with too much gardening.

So what to do? If you have pain or an injury now, rather than just technique difficulties, you need to see a Chartered Physiotherapist. They are the experts in the diagnosis and treatment of soft tissue injuries. If you need to see your doctor, your Chartered Physiotherapist will get in touch with your GP. On the other hand, you may

have no pain but are noticing stiffness or problems with your technique. In this case, you should book a session with the golf pro in your club. He or she will be able to figure out whether your difficulties are associated with poor technique and are correctable with coaching and practice or whether stiffness in your joints is preventing you from swinging correctly. If the latter is the case you should see a Chartered Physiotherapist after seeing your golf pro. Physiotherapy will help you in a number of ways, such as improving your posture, mobilizing your stiff joints, strengthening any muscle groups that need strengthening and teaching you how to make the most of the body you have!

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