

## APTA | PT Tips for Golfers

### Get Back on the Green: Posture, Fitness, and Flexibility Are Key to a Better Golf Game and to Avoiding Injuries

The achievements of golfers such as Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Lorena Ochoa highlight a new athleticism associated with a sport that was once considered "leisurely." Today's amateur and professional golfers, men and women alike, are stronger, more flexible, and wielding more powerful swings than ever before.

According to the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), awareness of proper posture and the importance of fitness and flexibility are just as important for weekend golfers as they are for the pros. Keith Kleven, PT, ATC, of Keith Kleven Physical Therapy in Las Vegas, Nevada, has worked with a number of prominent professional golfers including Mark O'Meara, John Cook, Corey Pavin, Jonathan Byrd and Tiger Wood. Says Kleven, "Golfers spend thousands of dollars each year on new or improved equipment, but their most essential piece of equipment is their bodies."

#### Be Prepared to Excel

According to Kleven, the nation's 35 million golfers need to take the time to work at their game and their conditioning if they want to excel on the course. "Golfers should have access to a physical therapist who can assess their physical abilities and provide individualized training programs that address musculoskeletal balance, body mechanics, strength, posturing and cardiovascular fitness," notes Kleven.

#### This is Not Your Father's Golf Game

Just as in professional tennis, there has been a significant increase in injuries among professional golfers, primarily because the game has changed so drastically and training has become so intense. Strength, flexibility, and endurance are just as important as exceptional driving distance and keen putting skills. It is now the norm, not the exception, for professional men and women golfers to work with physical therapists and athletic trainers on improving these factors. But, warns Kleven, it is vital that these programs be tailored to their individual skills. "Certain types of training may actually hinder - not help - athletes," he says. "What may be acceptable for a professional football player may not work for a golfer."

#### The Swing's the Thing

Professional golfers make it look easy, but the golf swing is actually one of the most difficult and complicated movements in all of sports, requiring stability in some joints and flexibility in others. "Having proper motion, strength, and function throughout the swing play a large role in preventing injuries," says Kleven. "The payoff of a better swing is a more accurate ball strike, greater distance, and reduced stress on the muscles and joints."

#### Keeping Injuries at Bay

Kleven observes that his patients who are primarily weekend golfers often complain of spinal-related injuries, including upper and lower back, shoulder and neck pain. "Leisure golfers attempt to swing with

the speed and force of professional athletes, but they have to remember that with each swing, seven to eight times a golfer's weight is directed into the spine. With this kind of force, it's easy to damage discs and strain muscles," says Kleven. He says that multiple core (not just abdomen) stabilization exercises are critical. Pilates programs, which Kleven has been recommending since 1975, are excellent injury-prevention tools that can ultimately help golfers improve their performance. Golfers of all ages and abilities should make a habit of warming up and stretching before teeing off, adds Kleven. "It is important for golfers to spend at least 20 minutes warming up and stretching all the major muscle groups, especially the back and extremities, before practice or play. They shouldn't wait until they're on the course before stretching because that is neither practical nor conducive to a thorough stretch," he says.

Cardiovascular conditioning also plays a crucial role in performance, observes Kleven. Fatigue can result in poor performance due to a lack of coordinated body movements. To keep endurance up and muscles warm and conditioned, Kleven suggests golfers walk the course whenever possible, as continued aerobic conditioning is an essential component of golf fitness.