

What Your Golf Swing Says About Your Overall Health

How's your golf game? The answer may tell you a lot about your health.

While golfers often focus on improving their swing and lowering their scores, sports-medicine researchers and golf-industry experts increasingly are focusing on the links between golf and health. They



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are finding that everything from the quality of your swing to the yards you get from your drive can provide telling insights into your overall fitness and health. The good news is that a few simple steps to boost your health can also improve your game.

■ **You ride the golf cart.** If a golf cart is essential, you probably need to improve your fitness. A 160-pound golfer using a cart burns about three calories per minute while golfers who walk and carry their clubs burn about six calories a minute, according to the American Dietetic Association. After 18 holes, a cart rider will have a heart rate of about 86 beats a minute, but walking and carrying your own clubs pushes your exercising heart rate to 120, according to Golf Digest. Exercising at the higher end of your target heart rate range is a sign of better fitness. (Use the health tools at mayoclinic.com to calculate your exercising heart rate range.) "Golf is a great measure of fitness for the baby boomer generation," says Vijay Vad, a New York

sports-medicine specialist and consultant for the PGA Tour. "Do your legs ache at night? Do you take a cart? These are all indications of how healthy and fit you are."

■ **Short drives.** If your drives aren't going very far, it's often a sign of a flexibility problem in your lower body, particularly your hip muscles. Tight hip muscles wreck your swing and are a common cause of back pain. It can also be a sign of a sedentary lifestyle. Hours in the car or at a desk cause hip flexor muscles to shorten and stay tight. Over time, this loss of flexibility can hurt more than your golf game. Flexibility, particularly in your lower body, is a key determinant in how well you age, including your risk of falling and your ability to get around without assistance.

■ **Accuracy problems.** If the ball is consistently bending to the right or left, you may have posture, strength and flexibility problems in your upper body. This can be a sign of looming neck arthritis, risk for developing a stoop or back hump and shoulder problems that can affect your range of motion and ability to live independently as you age.

■ **Inconsistent swing.** If your swing is all over the place, it may be a sign that you lack strength in your "core" muscles. Your core includes the deep muscles in your ab-

domen as well as the hips, thighs and buttocks. Core strength affects your posture, stability and risk for injury. "If someone has an unpredictable golf game, chances are they have core-strength issues," says Christian Reichardt, a certified chiropractic sports physician

and owner of Golf Health, which operates two golf wellness and assessment clinics in California. "The golf industry looks at it as if we need to fix your swing, but I look at it as we need to fix your body."

■ **Your game falls apart after a bad shot.** How you react to a bogey or a birdie can also be

a sign of how you manage stress every day. A golfer whose game consistently falters after a bad shot or who stares at the ground in frustration may be someone who internalizes stress, a risk factor for heart disease and other problems. "If you internalize the bad shots and your performance decreases, then you may be building up the stress and you're not able to release it," says Dr. Vad. "For me personally, the good shots uplift me and the bad shots don't get to me that much."

To improve both your health and your golf game, start with stretching exercises before, during and after your round. Go to mayoclinic.com and search for golf stretches to see a slide show of useful exercises. The book, "Golf Rx" by Dr. Vad, includes 18 stretches golfers can do (one for each hole) to improve flexibility and release stress. And ask your golf pro or a sports-medicine specialist to evaluate your swing and help you determine your problem areas.

Golf Health

Here's a look at the health of the average golfer:

- 80% of golfers suffer from pain, injury or illness.
- 27% have back pain.
- 66% are overweight.
- 30% have played with a hangover.

Source: 2006 Golfer Health Study, Golf Digest