

Is Your Golf Game Setting You Up for Back Pain?

By: Dr. Brandon Crouch

If you play enough golf over enough time you will most definitely make changes to your equipment and your swing in the hopes of hitting better shots and getting a better score. Make the wrong changes and create the wrong habits and you may just set yourself for trouble in the form of back pain. Although back pain is one of the most common injury golfers experience, your back is more than capable of handling your golf swing if you have the right habits, equipment, and fundamentals. If you follow these few tips, you may just keep your golf game and your back in tip top shape!^{1,2}

1. It all starts with the Fundamentals! Most of us first learned the game of golf from our father, friend, or just by picking up some clubs and swinging. This may have helped you get the fever for golf, but also could have set up some very poor biomechanical swing habits. Back pain created from your golf swing is often due to poor biomechanics, including poor motor control and poor swing techniques.³

If you look at the golfers at your local driving range the chances are pretty good you will not see two swings that are the same. Although this isn't a bad thing, it does illustrate the point that there are probably a lot of people with poor biomechanics and poor swing techniques. You wouldn't be able to dance the fox trot without the proper instructions so why would you try it on the golf course. A good golf teaching professional will help you to enhance your swing techniques and correct some of the poor habits before they lead to back and body injuries.

2. Game or Sport? What do you think? Do you think golf is considered just a game or a sport? Well you can actually say it is both. It is a game where you are competing against your fellow golfers, the golf course, and against yourself. Likewise, whether you are a professional or just an amateur, golf is also sport. Just like any sport, golf requires you to push your body beyond normal daily activities. Research from the New Jersey School of Medicine revealed both amateurs and professionals put 8 times the body weight of force through their spine when swinging a golf club. By working with a golf professional to help with your swing techniques and a health professional to isolate your body limitations, you will help yourself to be conditioned to prevent injury. If you fail to condition your body properly you might not be able to play the sport and may find yourself out of the game!^{3,4}

3. One size fits all Equipment! We of course know that there is not a one size fits all set of golf clubs. If this were true we would all be the same height and weight. Poor fitting equipment will cause you to create swing compensations and will be a big cause of injury for your shoulders, wrists, or low back.

A good golfer lets their clubs do the work creating effortless strain upon their body upon ball contact. When your clubs don't size up properly it can create tremendous strain on your ankles, knees, hips, back, shoulder, and wrists just trying to drive the club head through the ball. This is also true for the younger golfer playing with dad's clubs which

are too tall and heavy. From your shoes to your clubs you need to have equipment correctly sized for you. A golf teaching professional can help you to make sure you are properly suited up and ready to play.

4. Weekday Weaknesses to Weekend Warrior! What you do all week will set you up for disaster come the weekend if you're not careful. For example, if you spend most of your week on your butt, whether in an airplane, on the computer, or on the couch you are going to predisposition your body for breakdown. The reason this can create problems for your low back is because when you are in the seated position your hip flexor muscles, particularly the psoas muscle, becomes shortened or contracted. If you stay in this seated position for long periods of time on a daily basis, these muscles want to stay this length (short.)^{5,6}

The psoas muscle extends from the front of your thigh bone (femur), reaches up through your hip joint, and attaches to your spine in the lower back (lumbar vertebrae). A tight psoas muscle will put a constant pull and strain on your back. Therefore, when you are on the 3rd hole and your low back starts to tighten your body will start to compensate. Your swing becomes shortened, your shoulders will have a longer turn to compensate, which will result in a pulled golf swing sending the ball off target. Your swing not only suffers, but so does your body.

In most cases you can not change your weekday routines; however, you can change how your body deals with it. Having weekday routines that sets your body up for having weakness such as shortened muscles or poor postures can create problems when that weekend warrior wants to come out and play. The help of a health professional with regular stretching and strengthening of the proper muscle groups will keep you ready for the weekend.

5. Practice Makes Perfect! Back at the driving range you have a full bucket of balls and your choice of clubs to start your practice. What do you choose first and does it really matter? When it comes to your back you bet it does. Stepping up to the practice tee, pulling out the "big dog" (driver) and hitting repeated power shots out into the wild blue yonder may look nice, but it will most certainly set you up for trouble. This type of practice can cause muscle fatigue which can create excessive compensations in your hips and upper body. This in turn leads to back injuries.

To make the most of your driving range experience without causing yourself future problems, take care when warming up. Begin with the short irons and with short swings. Your spine and supporting muscles need a chance to warm up too. Slowly add the length of those shots little by little. After you have warmed up with a dozen or so shots, then you can increase your range of movement of your golf swing and increase your club head speed. Remember that letting the club do the work will help restrain from over exertion. Work your way up through the clubs to the mid-irons, then to the long irons, and finally finishing up with the driver. Not only will this allow proper warm up as you move through the clubs it will also help you establish the length and quality of your shots. As

always, a local golf professional is a good source to work with to help make the most of your practice time.

Golf can be a fun yet demanding on your body. The truth is that your body, including your low back, is capable of handling the game of golf when the proper biomechanics, habits, and techniques are utilized. A back injury often originates from compression and excessive torsion of the spine, when the body does not perform in the correct sequence (rotate correctly) during a golf swing. When you are in doubt enlist the help of the professionals such as your golf pro and a health professional. If you already have back pain then it's time to get some help or you will risk further injury. Otherwise, follow these simple guidelines and you will be playing pain free golf for a long time.

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