



Understanding Golf Injuries And How To Prevent Them

The majority of injuries that occur in golf result from unusual demands put on bones, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves, especially if you haven't been active for a period of time and/or if you don't know how to properly swing a golf club. So what exactly are such injuries, the causes, and how can we prevent them? Dr Jonathan Lee Yi-Liang, Hand & Reconstructive Microsurgery Surgeon from Mount Elizabeth Hospital and Parkway East Hospital shares more.

How common are golf injuries and who gets them?

Golf injuries occur with surprising frequency to both professional and amateur golfers. Injuries to the upper limbs (shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand) account for more than half of the total injuries sustained while playing golf. The majority of these injuries occur to the left (lead) side of the body. Interestingly, female professional golfers are particularly prone to wrist and hand injuries (which amount to about one-third of injuries to women) while male professionals suffer the same type of injuries at about half that rate.

What are the causes of upper limb injuries in golf?

Golf requires both focused force and repetitive actions. The vast majority of golf injuries are not caused by a single traumatic incident but occur as a result of tissue damage sustained over time.

In general, professional golfers sustain injuries from overuse whereas for amateur golfers, it is often caused by a combination of the following factors:

- Overuse (excessive play or practice)
- Failure to warm up properly
- Poor swing technique / mechanics
- Poor physical conditioning
- Hitting the ground or an object during a swing

What are the common types of golf injuries affecting the upper limbs?

A variety of acute and chronic injuries are common to professional and amateur golfers. Generally considered as a benign activity, many players experience numerous minor and major ailments. The most common injuries in professional golfers include those to the lower back, wrist, hand, shoulder, knee and elbow. Similarly, in amateur golfers, injuries to the lower back, elbow, hand/wrist and shoulder are most common.

Golfer's Elbow and Tennis Elbow: "Golfer's Elbow" (medial epicondylitis) is an inflammation, soreness or pain on the single side of the upper arm near the elbow. It is a common golf condition second only to back injuries. The only difference between golfer's elbow and tennis elbow is that, with tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis), the outside of the upper arm is afflicted and the inner arm is impinged with golfer's elbow. Both can be a reaction to a single excessive action. However, repetitive stress from smaller shocks is usually the culprit.

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome: Carpal Tunnel Syndrome can be an unforeseen result of the repetitive stress of numerous games of golf played over several months continuously. It affects the nerves of the hands, causing tingling 'pins and needles', numbness of the fingers and clumsiness of movement. It can be a serious injury creating incapacitation and sometimes requiring surgery.

DeQuervain's Tendinitis: DeQuervain's causes pain in the wrist near the base of the thumb, and is caused by an inflammation in the tendons that control the thumb. Pain typically occurs at the left wrist, at the top of the backswing.

Trigger Finger: Trigger finger can cause a finger or fingers to lock up, resulting to 'clicking' or 'snapping' of the finger and pain in the palm. The condition is caused when the flexor tendon sheath, through which the finger tendons run, is inhibited.

Wrist Impaction Syndrome: Impaction syndromes of the wrist are caused when the bones of the wrist bang into one another due to excess or repetitive movements.

Extensor Carpi Ulnaris (ECU) Tendon Subluxation: When the wrist tendon sheath starts to slide in its groove, ECU Tendon Subluxation may occur, causing recurrent wrist pain.

Fracture of Hamate Bone: The hamate bone is a small bone on the pinky side of the wrist. The hamate has a small prominence called the hook, which juts into the palm. The way most golfers grip their clubs puts the butt-end of the club right up against the hook of the hamate during the swing.

Shoulder Pain: Shoulder pain in a golfer might be caused by any of several different underlying conditions, including: rotator cuff tendinitis, or a tear or impingement in the rotator cuff; Acromioclavicular (A-C) joint arthritis; or instability in the joint.

How to prevent or minimise golf injuries to the upper limb?

It is thought that swinging techniques are the most likely culprit for the differences in frequency of injured parts of the body between an amateur and a professional player. So, would hiring a golf coach reduce the risks of golf-related injuries? Dr Jonathan Lee says that this move could certainly reduce the risks of injuries somewhat, but will not completely eliminate them. He has these tips to offer:

- Develop good habits and proper techniques can go a long way. Seek professional advice for training sessions to make the most of your time on the course and at the range, while having enough time to rest and recover.
- Invest in proper equipment that suits your technique, body type and gender. It can also help to minimise excessive strains on the body, and allow you to enjoy the game even more.
- Avoid overtraining, and engage in other sports or exercises between your golf sessions to increase your overall fitness and endurance. Doing so can allow for recuperation to the different regions of your body.
- Warm up and warm down. Take a few minutes to stretch before and after your game.

When should you seek treatment?

Treatment begins with clinical diagnosis, rest, medication, splinting and simple non-surgical therapy. When medical therapy fails, seek help from your doctor. If surgery is required, minimally invasive approaches can now be offered. Early diagnosis of the cause and proper treatment can make a significant impact on the speed and quality of recovery.

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24-Hour Helpline : (65) 6735 5000

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