



What the Pros Already Know Form, Fitness, and Flexibility Give Golfers a Better Game

ALEXANDRIA, VA. The incredible achievements of Tiger Woods highlight a new athleticism associated with a sport that was once considered "leisurely." Today's professional golfers, both men and women, are faster, more flexible, and more powerful than ever before. They are more health conscious, participating in rigorous daily training, including weight lifting, flexibility exercises, aerobic conditioning, and sport-specific training to enhance body mechanics. According to the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), a health conscious approach is just as important for the amateur golfer as it is for the pro. Awareness of proper form and the importance of fitness and flexibility will help the recreational golfer improve his or her game and may even lower that all-important handicap. Keith Kleven, PT, MS, ATC, of Keith Kleven Physical Therapy in Las Vegas, Nevada, works with a number of prominent professional golfers, including Tiger Woods, Mark O'Meara, Kris Tschetter, and Emilee Klein. "A golfer often spends hundreds of dollars on the latest equipment, but forgets that his or her body is the most important piece of equipment," Kleven says. "The pros make it look easy, but the golf swing is actually one of the most difficult and complicated movements among all sports, requiring stability in some joints and flexibility in others. Bending the knees before swinging, rotating the hip and spine during the golf swing, and using proper range-of-motion techniques throughout the swing play a large role in preventing injuries." As an added bonus, a better swing results in a more accurate ball strike, a greater distance, and reduced stress on the muscles and joints. "While these facts apply to all golfers, female golfers' unique differences in anatomy, physiology, and body mechanics must be considered when designing a training program," Kleven adds. Weekend golfers often attempt to swing with the speed and force of professional athletes, and often after sitting behind a desk all week and without warming up. "When the weekend comes, they hit the links and blast the golf balls as far as possible," says Kleven. "Seven-to-eight times a golfer's weight is compressed into the spine with every swing. With this kind of force, it's easy to damage discs and strain muscles." In fact, the most common injuries among golfers involve the spine, including the upper and lower back and neck. Flexibility is as important as proper form. Golfers of all ages and abilities should make a habit of warming up and stretching beforehand. "It is important for golfers to spend at least 20 minutes warming up and stretching all the major muscle groups, especially the back and the lower 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," says Kleven. Cardiovascular conditioning also plays a crucial role in performance. Fatigue can result in poor performance due to lack of coordinated body movements. To keep endurance up and muscles warm and conditioned, Kleven suggests golfers walk the course whenever possible. He also states that continued aerobic conditioning is an essential component of fitness for golf. And strength training is also an excellent injury prevention tool that can ultimately help golfers improve their game.

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