

Stretch out your playing days

Age may not be a barrier to playing golf, but in order to play as well as you can for as long as you can, it's important to have your body in top working order



Getting older is a fact of life. While that doesn't mean our enthusiasm for sport diminishes it does mean our bodies are less sprightly and, like vintage cars, require greater attention.

As we age, joint mobility reduces, there is a loss of muscle flexibility, a reduction in muscular strength, power and endurance, and reduced cardiovascular fitness. As these are all key components of an efficient and consistent golf swing, it means the natural ageing process adversely affects golfing performance.

Research indicates that from the age of

25 the body loses muscle mass at a rate of 1 per cent a year. If nothing is done to improve strength and power outputs, by the time you get to 50 you'll have lost 25 per cent of your body mass.

Your body requires an adequate neuromuscular system in order to swing the golf club efficiently. The swing requires strength and stability to maintain spine angles while generating dynamic movement of the hips, trunk and shoulders. As muscular strength diminishes, it becomes more challenging to achieve a consistent and efficient golf swing.

The loss of hip, shoulder and spine

mobility is what most inhibits senior golfers as they try to complete a full and efficient golf swing. If the joints are not able to function properly, the body will compensate as it endeavours to execute the mechanics of the golf swing correctly.

But while ageing is inevitable, the good news is that there is something you can do to reduce, or even reverse its symptoms when it comes to your golf game. In so doing, you will benefit from improved performance while reducing the likelihood of developing injuries, and that in turn leads to longevity playing golf.



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Looking after your body

If you're looking for a quick fix to the ageing problem, forget it... there isn't one! It is important that all key areas of physical fitness are addressed and developed, including flexibility, balance, stability, strength, power, endurance and cardiovascular fitness.

The most effective way of restoring a senior golfer's game is to improve joint and muscle flexibility through an effective flexibility

programme. Building strength and cardiovascular fitness is important, but too often tight bodies become tighter through strengthening programmes. And a tight, inflexible body is dangerous for a golfer.

Physical screenings

Everyone's body is different, which is why every golfer's swing is unique. However, there is still a structurally balanced state our body should be in physically, no matter our age.

Nine times out of 10, as the body ages muscle imbalances develop. It is more than likely the muscles you require to be long and flexible – for an ideal golf swing – are actually too short and too tight; conversely, the muscles you want to be strong and powerful are in fact long, weak and inhibiting.

A typical pattern among middle-aged to senior golfers relates to those who, due to their occupations, have spent 40 to 50 hours a week sitting on their posteriors. You can imagine the negative effect this has on posture and muscle balance.

It is important, therefore, that individuals are physically screened so these muscle imbalances can be identified.

A typical assessment includes posture and spinal analysis plus testing of flexibility, muscle strength and golf-specific functionality. Any underlying injuries or pathologies are also assessed.

Flexibility

Flexibility is the key to longevity in senior golf; in fact, poor flexibility is one of the most common causes of inconsistent golf swings among senior golfers, something that greatly increases the risk of sustaining injury through the resultant poor biomechanics.

Research shows that professional golfers have 50 to 100 per cent more flexibility in their upper trunks than the average non-golfing person.

Because trunk rotation should account for the majority of the rotation of the body during the backswing, it is difficult for the average person

to replicate the swings we see being executed by the world's top golfers.

Because the senior golfer lacks flexibility, he or she seeks to generate rotation and length in their backswing in other ways. They lose spine angle, over-rotate the hips and disconnect the arms – all of which has a negative effect on the golf swing.

We have observed golfers spending hours, months, even years attempting to eliminate these swing faults when all they needed was greater flexibility. For some reason, the importance of flexibility – and its direct effect on the golf swing – is often overlooked.

Stretching improves flexibility and every golfer should build a routine into their day. A typical programme takes, on average, 10 to 20 minutes (not much time is it?) and includes stretches for the lower limbs and hips, lower back, trunk, shoulders and neck muscles. Performed daily, and targeting tight muscles and joints, a stretching routine helps the body achieve and maintain optimal flexibility and golf performance.

The added bonus is that it ensures you will enjoy longevity in golf without doing long-term damage to your body.

Pre-round warm up

Many senior golfers have experience of or know people who complain about scoring poorly early in a round because their body is taking time to get moving. Not warming up before you play not only affects your performance but also greatly increases the risk of injury to the lower back, hips and shoulders.

It takes only a few minutes to warm up before you play. Your routine should involve dynamic stretches of the shoulders, trunk and leg muscles and include movements relevant to your golf swing.

Talk to your coach or visit a golf specialised physiotherapist or trainer for a personalised stretching programme and warm-up routine. ●

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