

Get into Full Swing by Improving Your Golf Fitness

Focus on strength, flexibility, posture and a dynamic warm-up to improve your game and avoid injury.

If your fitness isn't up to par, your golf game probably isn't, either.

Golf requires flexibility, strength and endurance. It requires a commitment to fitness not only when you step to the first tee, but also when you're off the golf course.

"You're the most important piece of equipment," says Jeff Ciolek, PT, ATC, a physical therapist and athletic trainer with Cleveland Clinic's Rehabilitation and Sports Therapy. "Yes, your clubs are important, but the better you take care of yourself, the better chance you have to maintain your longevity and participation in the sport. And, if you exercise on a regular basis, there's a good chance that you're going to be able to play more rounds of golf during the year."

BE STRONG, FLEXIBLE AND UPRIGHT

Your muscle tone potentially affects the speed of your swing, and without strong muscles, you may lack the capacity to generate enough power to hit the ball any great distance. But your strength is only as good as the flexibility you have with it, Ciolek says: "You need to have joints that can move through ranges of motion and allow you to execute your swing."

When you're away from the golf course, perform exercises to strengthen your legs, arms, shoulders and the core muscles of your abdomen and back. That regimen also should include stretches that target and improve the flexibility of your hips, shoulders and back (see chart for examples of stretches that are suitable for most men).

Consult with your doctor and/or a golf professional to develop a workout regimen tailored to your individual needs and capabilities. "The one problem we see is the 60-year-old guy

who pulls out a golf magazine and sees exercises that someone says are good for golfers, but they may not be good for that person," Ciolek says.

An often overlooked, yet critical, component of good golf fitness is posture. Poor posture restricts mobility of the thoracic spine. "If you're slumped and rounded off in the shoulders, that mid to upper portion of the back can't rotate as well," Ciolek says. "When you maintain an upright posture, all of the sudden your turn and rotation improve."

Make a conscious effort to correct your posture. Sit upright in a chair, drawing in your lower abdominal muscles, raising your chest and keeping your head aligned with your shoulders. Hold that position for 30–60 seconds. Ciolek also recommends thoracic extension: While seated or standing, place your hands behind your head at neck level (interlacing your fingers) and extend your elbows backward to loosen your upper back.

GET READY FOR GOLF

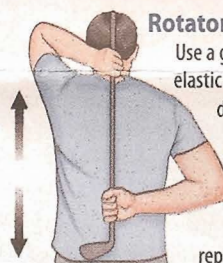
A study published in the December 2010 issue of the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that golfers hit the ball farther and had faster club speed, better accuracy and better ball contact when they warmed up by taking practice swings rather than doing passive stretches.

Ciolek recommends such dynamic warm-ups before golfing and saving your static stretching routine for times when you're not on the links. To warm up, get into your golf stance, cross your arms in front of you, and slowly rotate into your backswing—all without holding a club. "Do half-swings without your clubs," Ciolek says. "There's a trend in all sports to make your stretching and loosening more dynamic."

You'll also get warmed up more quickly if you walk the course instead of ride in a cart. Along those lines, maintaining good cardiovascular fitness can help improve your stamina so you still have energy left by the time you reach the 18th green.

"The better off your overall health is, the better chance you'll be able to continue to perform," Ciolek advises. "Staying fit can enhance your durability, decrease injury and accelerate recovery from any musculoskeletal problems." ■

EXERCISES FOR BETTER GOLF FITNESS

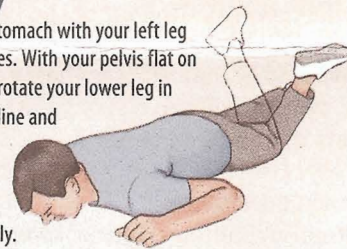


Rotator cuff stretch

Use a golf club, towel or elastic band. Gently pull down and hold for 10-15 seconds, then up for 10-15 seconds. Perform 2-3 repetitions each day.

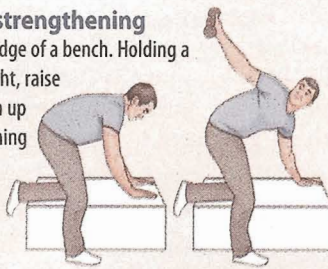
Hip mobility

Lie flat on your stomach with your left leg bent at 90 degrees. With your pelvis flat on the floor, gently rotate your lower leg in toward your midline and then outward. Do 2 sets of 15 repetitions with each leg daily.



Scapular strengthening

Kneel at the edge of a bench. Holding a 1-pound weight, raise your right arm up and back, turning your head to follow your arm motion. Do the same with your left arm. Do 2 sets of 15 repetitions daily.



Fall-out lunge

Hold a golf club across your back behind your neck at shoulder level. Bend your left knee and slowly lunge straight ahead; then gently turn your trunk to the left at a 45-degree angle. Repeat with your right knee bent and turning to the right. Do 2-3 sets of 15 repetitions daily.

