

## THE BACK NINE

Those who play a lot of golf have probably run into some sort of back problem at one time or another—if you haven't yet, it's just a matter of time. Since golfers are so vulnerable to back injury, we decided to ask Dr. Kenneth Light, orthopedic surgeon, spine specialist and golf enthusiast about golfers' back injuries. And yes, we asked him exactly nine questions we wanted answered.

**CS:** You have said before that “Each golfer’s lower back can accept only a defined number of twisting and extension over a given period of time.” Are we to infer from this that every golfer will suffer back problems?

**Dr. Light:** Yes, almost every single golfer has back problems.

**CS:** Why is the golf swing so problematic for backs?

**Dr. Light:** The golf swing is a very unnatural thing. For some people it's more unnatural than for others, but the act of swinging does two things: First, you're twisting your lower back and this forces the joint to extend at the same time. The combination leads to the disruption of the discs and aggravates previous problems. Almost every professional golfer has had or does have some back trouble. It's also the angle at which you swing. It's a vertical swing, and to accomplish the swing you have to lean over a bit. In that position, when you twist, you tear the covering of the disc. Leaning back stretches the back and puts the disc in a weak position. With the top part of your torso you're twisting and extending, with the bottom part of your body fixed to the ground.

**CS:** How much does proper swing technique play in back injury?

**Dr. Light:** A lot. There was a thing in golf about 10 years ago called the “reverse C.” At the end of a swing you were supposed to extend your back. This is very bad posture with which to swing. Work on standing more upright at the end rather than leaning back or arching your swing at the end.

**CS:** What can golfers do to prevent back problems?

**Dr. Light:** One thing you can do is when you go to the driving range, start out with one small bucket of balls. Don't hit two large buckets of balls. The stress is cumulative. Also, do a complete stretching of the lower back. Lie on the ground, bring your knees up to your chest. Touch your toes, do gentle twisting. If those activities are causing any weakness, soreness or stiffness, take it very easy that day or maybe come back another day. And finally, always start out with a pitching wedge or nine-iron and half a swing. Don't have your first swing of the day be with a driver. Some golfers can only handle one round of golf a week. Listen to your back. Don't overswing. The weekend golfer goes right out to the first tee and tries to hit a 300-hundred-yard drive. Swing easier.

**CS:** Is someone who is in better shape less likely to suffer a back injury?

**Dr. Light:** Yes, but if you have a pre-existing back problem, even if you're in good shape, it [golf] may aggravate it.

**CS:** Everyone says that the remedy to a weak back is strong stomach muscles and yet everyone seems to warn that sit-ups or sit-up-like exercises are dangerous to the back. What's the solution to this 'Catch-22'?

**Dr. Light:** Isometric abdominal sit-ups. Lie on your back and come up just a few inches and then hold the position for six seconds before relaxing.

**CS:** If someone starts feeling back pain, is there some kind of preliminary action they can do on their own, i.e. exercises to nip the problem in the bud, or do they need to see a back specialist right away?

**Dr. Light:** Back pain is very common. Most back pain is not very serious and doesn't need medical attention. If it travels below the knee, then that's the kind of backache you need to see someone about. If it's limited to the back, it's brought on by changes in your normal routine. All you have to do is eliminate those changes, avoid lifting and bending. Nine out of 10 times it will go away within a week. If it lasts for three weeks, see someone.

**CS:** How much of a role does mental stress play in back injuries?

**Dr. Light:** Less than you'd think. Pure psychological conditions do not cause back pain. When you really talk to people, they may be in high stress situations but these situations are also high in physical stress, i.e. they're sitting in a chair for 12 hours a day and the physical stress is probably what is causing the problem.

**CS:** Should surgery be a last resort, or does it just depend on the problem?

**Dr. Light:** Depends on the problem, but surgery is usually the last resort—when the pain is disabling, so much so that you can't get out of bed or can't go to work. Surgery is rarely the solution for aching backs. For those people, a conditioning program that builds up the muscles around the spine is the best treatment.