

YOUR SWING. YOUR BACK. THE FACTS



The modern golf swing is getting longer, faster and more powerful than ever – and, contrary to what you might have read, that doesn't mean back problems for life. David Cunninghame speaks to those in the know to find out more.

We all know that golfers today are swinging the club harder, faster and hitting the ball further than ever before – but, by copying today's top pros, are you likely to end up with serious, long-term back problems?

A study published in the Journal of Neurosurgery: Spine in February 2019 claimed the so-called, 'X-Factor' golf swing, that is used by pretty much every tour pro these days, could easily cause back pain and injuries.

The X-Factor swing comes from rotating the shoulders further in relation to the hips, creating more wound-up potential energy, which translates to a more explosive downswing. According to the study, the twisting motion puts added strain on the thoracic (mid) and lumbar (lower) spine, while the powerful downswing causes a 'crunch' that damages the disc and facet joints.

Dr Roger Hawkes, who was the Chief Medical Officer of the European Tour for more than 20 years, however, begs to differ with the study's findings.

Dr Hawkes worked with European Tour pros on a daily basis and was on the frontline when it came to dealing with the injuries they suffered.

"The most common injuries I saw during my time on tour were wrist, neck and back injuries," Hawkes tells *bunkered*. "The modern, 'X-factor' golf swing, rotating the shoulders as much as possible in relation to the hips, does place more stress on the lumbar spine than the old fashioned, Ben Hogan-style of swinging the club. But, the fact of the matter is, there is no overwhelming evidence to suggest that today's pros are more or less likely to experience back pain as the pros of yesteryear."

There is a good reason for this. For years now, golf's health professionals have been well aware of the potential dangers the modern swing can pose and have helped pros take action to prevent injuries from occurring.

"The increased stresses of the modern golf swing is something I have been lecturing on for 20-plus years," says Dr Hawkes. "It's nothing new. Over that time, I have also been involved in educating golfers on how to manage and prevent the potential threat through effective strength and conditioning training for the surrounding muscles. This training is what helps to keep the joints and spine protected."

"You might have assumed that the number of back injuries on tour would have increased in recent years due the powerful nature of the game today, but I am not convinced.

"When I first started working on the tour, there was nowhere near the same emphasis on strength and conditioning training as there is today. For that reason, and despite the fact pros are swinging harder than ever before, over the last 20 years, we have actually seen the number of back injuries remain at about the same level and perhaps even decline slightly, because the pros are taking injury prevention seriously."

Tiger Woods has become somewhat of a poster boy for back injuries, having undergone four major back surgeries. Dr Hawkes, though, believes his is very much an extreme case. "From my perspective on the European Tour, there


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ETPI

ETPI was developed by the European Tour's medical and performance services team to allow golfers of all abilities to make use of the knowledge that has been amassed by the tour's performance and medical practitioners over the past 20 years using data from the best players in the world.

The ETPI says doing exercises like 'open the book' as part of your daily stretching and warm-up before golf will help you improve your thoracic spine rotation and, subsequently, your golf game.

are plenty of players with a similar level of athletic ability as Tiger and similar golf swings but by no means are the kind of issues he has had to deal with becoming the norm. In my time on the tour, I haven't seen very many players that have had to give up the game or resort to the kind of surgeries Tiger has had to in recent years.

"I'm not expecting to see an epidemic of future golfers having to quit the game in their early forties due to back injuries caused by the aggressive manor in which they swing the golf club."

So, should we all start undergoing strength and conditioning training to protect backs? It certainly wouldn't hurt to do so – but, for most of us, preventing injury can come down to something as simple as warming up.

"Most golfers that tee it up in their Saturday morning medal are unlikely to have the same kind of rotation that a tour pro has but the stresses on their back may or may

not be less. Anyone could undergo a strength and conditioning program to protect their back from injury but what everyone should be doing is warming up. There is good evidence to show that your chances of being injured during a round of golf are significantly reduced if you have a warm-up of seven minutes or more.

"For the better players that play regularly and generate a lot of power, undertaking some strength and conditioning would be a good idea. There is plenty of information out there from institutions such as the ETPI (European Tour Performance Institute & Performance Unit) that will show you how to become stronger, fitter and build endurance in order to prevent injury."

So, the modern golf swing *does* pose more inherent threats than the way people used to swing the golf club 40, 50 years ago but the simple fact is that golf *doesn't* lead to back pain anywhere near as much as some people would have you believe.

"By taking things seriously, warming up, undertaking some general strength and conditioning training and not playing or practising above your limits then you should be able to stay injury-free."

"If, however, you are unfortunate enough to experience back pain out on the course then there is no need to worry. See a physiotherapist who understands golf because there are number of ways to counter issues that arise and keep you out there playing."

Dr Roger Hawkes works with the Institute of Sport Exercise & Health (ISEH) and is a lead doctor for the European Tour



Keep your back in shape

Daniel Coughlan, the England Golf National Lead for Sports Science and Medicine, on the things golfers can do to help prevent back injury

» How important is strength and conditioning training for today's elite golfers?

Virtually every player on tour will have a strength and conditioning program in order to prevent injury. Resistance training has been shown to massively reduce the risk of injury. Golf is no different from any other elite sport in that way. Around 80% of injuries in golf are related to work load management. That basically means golfers pushing their bodies beyond their capabilities, whether that be through practising too much or an inconsistent practice regime. There is research that clearly shows you can reduce that number by about 50% through effective resistance training.

» What can everyday golfers do to help prevent injury?

For most golfers out there, any exercise or physical activity is a good start. If you play golf regularly then you are going to produce high forces in your back that are going to cause training responses and adaptation and, as a result, you will become stronger. The more consistent you are with your training and practise, the less likely you are to get injured as you will be better adapted to the stresses of the golf swing. Contrary to some people's beliefs, playing golf regularly and on a consistent basis will, in fact, strengthen your back as opposed to causing injury, so long as you don't overdo it.

» If I wanted to make my back stronger and protect against injury then what should I be doing?

It can be as simple as playing another sport that involves a bit of loading. It could be swimming, tennis, badminton or rock climbing. By taking part in these different sports,



you are going to stimulate other muscles in your back and help to strengthen your spine.

If you wanted to go to the next level and really target strength and conditioning for your back then any weight-based resistance training in the gym is what you should be looking into. Even a generic training program is going to work wonders for your health and well-being.

If you want to specifically target your back then doing any kind of squat, deadlift or heavy pull and push exercises such as pull-ups will have a really positive impact. You just have to be careful not to push beyond your capabilities when you're weight training.

» If someone is suffering from back pain, is there always a road back to recovery?

Very rarely do you come across someone who has suffered an injury that isn't able to come back to a sport they love and golf is no different. It is all about getting the right support and advice that will allow you to steadily build your activity levels and strength back up to a place where you can step back onto the golf course pain-free.

Daniel Coughlan is the National Lead for Sports Science and Medicine at England Golf

Back pain is the largest single cause of disability in the UK

Research by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) found that the number of people experiencing back or neck pain on a weekly basis has risen from 40% to 49%. Moreover, almost two-thirds (65%) of us now experience back or neck pain each month, up 16% over the same period.

The costs attributable to back pain in the UK are estimated at around £12bn a year, due to people being off work, with a further £1.6bn spent on treatment.