

SPORTS MEDICINE

Dr. William J. Bryan

Prepare your back for the game of a lifetime

Neck and lumbar spine issues forced LPGA champion Annika Sorenstam to pull out of a number of tournaments this year. Many golfers, professional and amateur alike, are plagued by neck and back problems. My column this month will address those of you who have normal backs and those who wonder how they can continue their game with neck and back pain.

To play the game at a high level these days, you need a good combination of spine strength and flexibility to prevent neck and back problems. Strengthening your core muscles will help take the pressure off your back.

It's imperative to stretch everyday. Rotate through your golf swing at least once a day (a good thing to do in the shower when you're not singing!). Practice rotating your spine and holding it in the back swing position for 10 seconds then follow through and hold it for another 10 to 20 seconds. Do 10 repetitions and repeat this two to three times a day. You'll be surprised how much flexibility you gain. Talk to your fitness trainer, your physical therapist or your physician about an appropriate strengthening program for your age, taking into account any pre-existing neck or back problems.

Most golfers bring the "bad back and nuisance neck" to the golf course from preexisting conditions, but the incredible strain of the "modern golf swing" can either irritate both a normal and abnormal spine.

When I was learning to play the game, I was taught to use my legs to help drive the ball. But in recent years, pros have been teaching this "modern golf swing." With this approach you use more of a traditional movement that involves planting the feet and legs and rotating the core of your body (stomach, back and hips) with very little, if any, movement from the lower body.



The spine was meant to flex, extend, bend, straighten and rotate to a certain degree. The modern swing, however, causes the spine to rotate abnormally and opens you to serious back problems down the road—particularly if you are a maturing individual. The new swing is popular because the powerful rotation gives the maximum twist you need to achieve better club head speed and greater distance. But you have to ask yourself: is the 20 or 30 extra yards worth the development of spine problems in the long run?

Your spinal column is in sections; between each section are discs, cushions covered with fibrous tissue. At age 35 we begin to experience a weakening of the discs. The repeated rotation of the modern swing can break down the outer covering of the disc and cause it to leak, which will irritate surrounding tissue. If a portion of the disc comes out (herniates) it can push against a nerve and cause pain to shoot down your leg. Along with degenerative discs, the joints between the vertebrae can become arthritic.

With arthritis, pain is localized to the neck or back. This differentiates spine arthritis from pinched nerve sciatica. If you develop either prolonged neck or back pain, or if you have pain shooting down your arm or leg, consult your physician for evaluation.

If you are experiencing back pain, it's proper to stay off the course for a couple of weeks, and cut down on lifting heavy objects during that time. Rest is always the best medicine.

There are so many variations of neck and back problems that it is imperative you consult your medical staff to accurately design the problem. Don't be too anxious to start an exercise program in the face of neck or back pain without your medical—rehabilitative team's go ahead. In general, let things settle down, return to the game and realize that you have preexisting spine problems. Get serious about a lifetime of preventative neck and back exercises and precautions. **HL**

ABOUT DR. BILL BRYAN

Dr. Bill Bryan's expertise in orthopedic surgery ranges from arthroscopic shoulder surgery to applications of emerging surgical solutions for middle-age knee problems. He has served as a consultant to industries investigating advances in partial and total knee replacements and is also a PGA consulting physician.

Dr. Bryan served as the Houston Astros medical director from 1983 to 2003. During this time, he was president of Major League Baseball's Physician Association and gave numerous presentations concerning the surgical and non-surgical care of adult throwing injuries. He has worked with many local baseball figures to build a national, quality player evaluation, injury treatment and condition center. Dr. Bryan holds memberships in some of the most presti-

gious professional associations in the medical field.

Dr. Bryan is also a physician consultant for Physiotherapy Associates, the Official Healthcare Provider for the PGA, LPGA and the Champions Tour.

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Ranked No. 9 on FORTUNE's list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2007; named by U.S. News & World Report as one of America's Best Hospitals; designated as a Magnet hospital for excellence in nursing.

