

Stretching Exercises For Golf:

Does Pre-Game Stretching Matter?

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Sports medicine has made huge contributions to the performance of athletes of various sports. Strength and conditioning, nutrition, as well as training techniques have also radically changed over the last 50 years. Golf however, continues to be elusive to scientific methods and remains as one of those fields where the experience of a good coach still outweighs the sports scientist in most aspects that contribute to the overall performance of the player.

Recently, a couple of research papers have provided insight into the role of stretching for the golfer. It may seem like a simple issue but there's still a lot of controversy over the type of stretching to do. It's clear that poor flexibility leads to poor performance and higher risk of injury.

The big question then is - what kind of stretch?

There are two general ways to stretch: static and dynamic. A static stretch is how you might imagine a yoga session to look like - slowly moving into the stretch position and holding it for a period of 30 seconds or more. An example of a static stretch would be the hurdler's stretch - sitting on the floor with one leg stretched out in front, and reaching forward with the hands to touch the toes, holding the posture for at least half a minute.

A dynamic stretch, on the other hand, is performed by actively moving or swinging the body through the stretch, at the same time refraining from excessive jerky movements or using full strength. A functional dynamic stretch for a golfer would be to place a golf club over the shoulders, draping the wrists over the club ends, and gently rotating the trunk to the left and right. This is a great stretch for the trunk and shoulders.

There have always been advocates for both approaches; however recent data seems to suggest that dynamic stretching is the key to better performance on the course and driving range. A study conducted in Dublin City University, Ireland, has shown that dynamic stretching performed just before a trial of hitting the ball clearly produces better results than static or no stretching at all. Golf-club head speeds were

higher, swing paths straighter, and impact points were more central when warm-ups consisting of dynamic stretching with a golf club were performed.

What about doing both static and dynamic stretching at the same sitting?

According to a study by Stephen F. Austin State University, Texas, adding passive static stretches to a dynamic warm-up with golf clubs actually led to slower club-head speeds and poorer distance, accuracy and consistency in ball contact. Though this may sound frightening to the aspiring golfer, the negative effect of passive stretching gradually wore off, and became negligible about an hour after the warm-up routine.

The best guess at this time is that the static stretch may affect neurological function and coordination, or conversely change the compliance of the muscle-tendon unit. So does this mean static stretching is bad, and the dynamic stretch is good? Maybe not.

Although dynamic stretching produces better performance than static or no stretching at all, it actually does very little to improve the range of motion, which is key to good performance and management of injuries. Flexibility gives you better rotation, which leads to higher club speeds. However, static stretching prior to a game of golf may affect the body's way of keeping track of body position (also known as kinesthetic sense) and lead to poorer accuracy and control of movement.

Confused over what to do now?

A programme of static stretches should still be part of any athletes' fitness training regimen. It can be done during or after gym, weight training, aerobic fitness sessions, or even after a full day's game of golf.

In a nutshell, Dr Wong Yue Shuen advises that you should keep your stretches dynamic before the game.

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