

Whether you are an expert golfer or new to the sport, Eleanor Bird outlines how to play safely

Golf in full swing



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Golf is a great sport for people with mild to moderate arthritis. It can improve the strength and mobility of your limbs, spine and hips, help the range of motion in your joints and improve balance. It's low impact, which means little jarring on the joints.

'Golf certainly keeps me moving and exercises joints I wouldn't otherwise use,' enthuses golfer Clive Leeson. 'It also gets me out of the house – being out in the fresh air is certainly invigorating.' Clive, 63, has psoriatic arthritis.

Helen Brough, 66, who has rheumatoid arthritis, agrees: 'People play for the fresh air, the exercise and the all-important social life. I would've become very isolated when I was diagnosed if I hadn't gone back to it. You can start and continue at your own pace – you don't have to be super fit.'

Playing safely

The downside is that a golf swing places tremendous pressure on the spine and back muscles. 'The swing is very complex, and you're asking your body to do it sideways,' says Chris Keevil, physiotherapist. 'Ask your doctor if you should play. A physiotherapist can also assess you. If you are still quite mobile, golf may well be good for you. You might need to modify the equipment.' Chris runs a physiotherapy clinic for golfers and delivers the PGA-approved (Professional Golfers' Association) Get Fit to Golf programmes to assess and improve people's golf swings.

'Golf is no good if you can't grip a club. It's not going to be right for everyone – it depends on the damage in your knees, hips and back,' Chris adds. Neil Selwyn-Smith,

a golf pro from the PGA, believes that if you are starting from scratch, it does help if you can walk some distance: 'But I've only ever had one person in 40 years where I've had to say golf is not for you.'

'The next most important thing is to have lessons from a golf pro,' says Chris. A trained 'pro' (professional) will instruct you how to play safely. Find one through the PGA website at www.pga.info – click on find a golf pro – or call 01675 470333. Don't be afraid to explain your physical limitations. 'Whoever comes to me receives a full assessment of what they can and can't do,' explains Neil. 'I can adapt the game for them. I introduce the basic concepts, develop exercises designed to help with the swing and begin movements gradually – we're not straight into a Tiger Woods swing.' Lessons are critical even if you've played in the past. Neil says. 'You shouldn't use the same swing you've had for 20 years – you need to learn to adapt to what you can do now.'

Tony Myhill, 77, has osteoarthritis and gout. He recently had a hip replacement and recognises it will be months before he starts playing golf again. 'But it's a goal to aim for,' he says. 'A lot of people play with hip replacements. I'm looking forward to being back on the course. I'll start with a lot of practice shots and have a lesson with a pro. I must develop an accurate but short game – and give up being a tiger on the course.'

Build up gradually. After lessons and the driving range, try a few holes on a nine-hole course. Look for a group who play for fun and won't mind if you stop after a few holes. You could contact local

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Arthritis Care groups or log on to the online forums to find possible golfing partners. Clive comments: 'With my ride-on buggy, I can do nine holes. But my friends have been very good and understand I might want to stop after three.'

So remember to pace yourself. Play from the 150-yard marker rather than the tee if you are getting tired. Clive adds: 'I'm prepared for some pain to get the enjoyment factor from the golf. I also like just sitting in the clubhouse having a chat. It's finding the balance – we sometimes tend to go on for longer than we know we should.'

Helen realised on an Arthritis Care self-management course that she could get back to golf: 'As a result I made an action plan. I started walking out to meet the others. Next, I did one round with them.' Now she is playing fully again, but always paces herself and doesn't plan anything else for the day.

'Too many people arrive five minutes before a round and don't warm up, so injuries often happen during the first holes. Get there early,' warns physiotherapist Chris. Walk for a few minutes, then spend five or 10 minutes with gentle stretches. Take 10-15 swings on the practice range. Avoid getting cold on the course: 'When you're waiting for others to play, keep moving, do your exercises or stretch,' he adds. A physiotherapist or a golf pro can suggest tailored exercises to improve your strength and fitness.

Equipment

A golf pro can suggest equipment to suit your needs. 'Don't buy clubs before you've got advice from a pro,' says Neil. 'You can

David Rushbury (right) getting back in the swing of things after giving up golfing when he was first diagnosed with arthritis

get a lighter shaft and if you can't swing the club far, a "whippier" shaft will increase the speed the club hits the ball. The head can be weighted differently.' A specially fitted grip (or tape bound round the handle) will help you hold clubs firmly and reduce stress on finger joints. Wrist braces and gloves on both hands can help stabilise joints. A longer putter can keep you more upright – better for the back.

Clive has had several operations on his hands, but has built strength again and now plays with 'as thick a grip as they can make'. Helen also took advice on clubs: 'The man in the shop watched my swing and suggested much lighter shafts. He put an oversized gents' grip onto ladies' clubs so I could grip properly.' She is also careful not to 'take turf' or catch the club on the ground – to prevent jarring. Always use a tee to help.

'Try to use a golf bag with double straps to spread the weight,' says physiotherapist Chris. 'Take a minimum of equipment, and use trolleys or a powered caddy.' If you use a trolley, push it in front of you rather than pulling it. Electric golf caddies can be expensive, but you could try second-hand.

Wear comfortable, supportive shoes with room for any orthotics – follow Clive's lead by putting thick foam inside shoes to cushion your feet. If you can't walk long distances, motorised golf carts can help. Some courses hire these out (but far from all, so ask). Carts cannot be used in bad weather because they can slide about. Single seater buggies are accepted at some courses, but you usually have to buy your own, which is quite an investment.

Finding a course

'When you're learning, go to a starter centre or a municipal golf course. Even your local pitch-and-putt to see if you like it,' says Neil. 'You don't need to become a member of a private club. You can pay a green fee for a round of golf without joining, though hours may be limited. Pros at private clubs



will give lessons to non-members. Here in the Midlands, a lesson can cost between £20-50 an hour, but there are starter packages.' Only when you want to get a handicap and enter competitions do you need to become a member.

Ask around about local courses, or try the following websites:

- www.englishgolfunion.org
- www.scottishgolf.org
- www.welshgolfcourses.com
- www.accessplace.com/golf-course.northern-ireland

A new goal

Golf can become a way of life. Take golf pro David Rushbury: he has reactive arthritis, which stopped him playing for seven years and meant no less than five major operations. After gradually rebuilding fitness at the pool and gym, he's back as a pro, coaching in Ayrshire. He meets people with many forms of arthritis. 'A lot of people with arthritis don't believe they can move, but if they see me hit a ball, maybe they will see they can too,' he says. 'Golf teaches you to take one shot at a time. I've learned to live in the present with arthritis too.' So, for a new way to get fitter and meet people, how about golf? As Neil says: 'When you strike a golf ball properly, it's one of the great feelings in the world.' **an**

COMMON GOLF TERMS

Drive – the first shot from the tee.

Handicap – a measurement of how many strokes it takes you to complete the course. Lower is better. The handicap system should allow golfers of different abilities to play against each other.

Hole – a section of the course running from tee to fairway to the green, where the actual hole is. Courses usually have nine or 18 holes.

Par – the standard score for a hole (the number of strokes it takes to get the ball in the hole). 'Below par' means you have taken less strokes than par.

Stroke – a shot or hit of the ball.

Tee – a peg on which a ball rests before you hit it; also the area at the start of each hole from which you 'tee off'.