

Golf with a

Healthy Heart

Although Dr Eric Hong is a full time interventional and nuclear cardiologist (with a special interest in sports cardiology) at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, he is often seen on the green when he is not seeing patients.

"Endurance plays a key role in finishing a good round of golf with mental clarity and solid golf shots," says Dr Eric Hong. The golf enthusiast further explains that there are two types of endurance which are critical for golfers' performance on the green: cardiovascular and muscular endurance.

A fitter golfer is a better golfer

Being physically fit allows a golfer, recreational or competitive, to walk and play 18 holes without becoming fatigued. A high fitness level allows the golfer to stay physically and mentally focused throughout the game.

Cardiovascular demands of a golfer playing a 18-hole game

Assuming you walk a course of approximately six to seven kilometres, up and down hills, in 90 percent humidity and with a 20kg golf bag, you can expect the heart rate to increase to around 60 percent of its maximum function. It will stay at that level for a game lasting four hours or more.

It is therefore not uncommon for a golfer to arrive at a shot feeling out of breath, or with the heart beating rapidly. This will make it more challenging for the golfer to make an accurate approach or sink the putt.

It is important to attain optimal fitness in order to play a good game of golf. This is contrary to the popular belief that one can attain good cardiovascular fitness by solely participating in a game of golf. The concept cannot be emphasised enough especially for those who are obese or with underlying chronic medical conditions like diabetes

mellitus, hypertension, ischaemic heart disease or kidney impairment.

To improve your game significantly, it is crucial to cultivate cardiovascular endurance. Aim to do some physical activity at a moderate intensity for at least 30 minutes, five times a week. If you find that unachievable, this 30-minute activity can be broken down to shorter frequent sessions throughout the day. The improved stamina will make a significant difference to your game.

Muscle strengthening is equally important

Dr Hong finds climbing stairs at work a great source of aerobic exercise. It improves balance and core stability, builds lower body power and strengthens one's posture. Aim for quick steps - two steps at a time, or even three to make your calves and quadriceps work harder. Make a concerted effort when climbing down the stairs. This in turn will work and strengthen your opposing muscle group which consists of the gluteal, quadriceps and hamstrings muscles. Improving your overall balance, core stability and posture can contribute to building a body capable of a strong, consistent, stable swing.

Don't become the next sudden cardiac arrest event on the green

We often hear of sudden cardiac arrest events out on the green. How do we screen for our cardiovascular fitness and risk? A basic check would be to do a heart tracing, undergo an exercise treadmill and perhaps an echocardiogram. However, these tests have their limitations (for example, an exercise treadmill has a diagnostic accuracy of 70 percent while an echocardiogram has an accuracy of 85 percent). According to Dr Hong, the test that has a 95 percent diagnostic accuracy rating in identifying coronary heart disease is the Cardiac Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scan. This is one of the most reliable and

non-invasive functional cardiac imaging technologies available. This is a good cardiovascular screening test for golfers who are elderly, obese or have chronic illnesses such as ischaemic heart disease, diabetes mellitus and renal impairment.

In coronary heart disease, the coronary arteries (the small blood vessels that supply blood and oxygen to the heart) are narrowed due to the build-up of fatty materials and atheroma (plaque). As a result, blood flow to the heart is either slowed or can even stop. Early detection of coronary heart disease is vital as early treatment can prevent heart attack and/or stroke.

PET scan of the heart provides a non-invasive comprehensive assessment of blood flow to the heart muscle and coronary flow reserve. The main advantage of a cardiac PET scan over other conventional scans is that it can show how good the blood circulation is to each of the coronary vessel. This functional information is more important than quantifying the degree of blockage in a vessel.




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