

# Mile High

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### [ GET BACK TO GOLF ]

by Andy Dombro, MD

Thirty percent of golfers have experienced lower back pain (LBP) that has affected their ability to play – or at least enjoy – the game. That's due in large part to the fact that the golf swing creates considerable physical stress on the lower back.

The spine is an amazing structure made up of 24 vertebral bones with discs between them acting as cushions. The vertebrae are linked together by facet joints and are supported by hundreds of muscles, ligaments and tendons. The vertebral column houses the spinal cord, from which nerves branch off to various areas of the body. Those coming from the lower back, or lumbar spine (L1-L5), supply the hips, buttocks and legs.



LBP can be from overuse (too much practice) or from a combination of sporadic play, poor swing mechanics and lack of conditioning. The three most common causes of LBP in golfers are:

- Strains and sprains of the muscles, ligaments or tendons
- Disc problems
- Facet Joint Syndrome

Here are some daily strategies for improving your lower back health and minimizing your chance of injury:

- **Have good lifting technique.** Bend the knees, not the back. Hold items close to your body. Don't lift and twist simultaneously.
- **Improve your fitness.** A regular program designed to strengthen and stretch both the muscles around the spine and abdomen is recommended. Enlist a certified "golf fitness" trainer to help.
- **Add aerobic exercise to your regimen.** This prevents injuries due to fatigue on the back nine.
- **Improve swing mechanics.** Work with a professional instructor who understands how swing mechanics affect your body, taking your age, strength and flexibility into account.
- **Sit better.** Use a chair with good lumbar support and get up frequently.
- **Relax.** Stress increases the risk of LBP.
- **Lose weight.** Obesity increases the risk of LBP.

Before and during a round of golf, try the following:

- **Warm-up** with gentle stretching and easy golf swings.
- **Walk** the course if you're able. If you carry your clubs, use a lightweight bag that has a spring-loaded leg stand and dual carry straps. With a rolling cart, push, rather than pull. Riding carts are bad for your spine, but if you must use one, then get out and walk frequently. Choose to drive, so you can grip the wheel for extra back support.
- **Swing easy** to make the ball go far – and to protect your back!
- **Use a longer putter** to decrease bending over while putting.
- **When bending** to pick up your ball after draining that crucial putt, stand with one foot in front of the other and bend from the knees and hips, using your putter for support.



If you do injure your back, quit for the day. Rest for a day or two, using ice and anti-inflammatory medicine (but only if it's okay with your physician), gradually increasing your activity level. If the pain persists or radiates into your buttocks or legs, call your doctor.

With the weather finally warming up, it's time to "get back" to playing some pain-free, enjoyable golf!

