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MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

It seems, lately, that an increasing number of professional golfers, both men and women, are adorned with a variety of different bracelets and necklaces. And while making a fashion statement is certainly important, many of these actually serve a much more essential purpose – to control chronic pain and improve overall health, via the incorporation of magnets within these items of jewelry.

In professional golf, some of the better-known advocates of magnet therapy are Jim Colbert from the Champions' Tour and John Huston from the PGA Tour, but there are many others on both tours, as well as the LPGA and Nationwide tours. Beyond golf, former football great Dan Marino and professional tennis star Lindsey Davenport are fervent believers in the use of magnet therapy. In fact, it's been reported that close to twenty percent of patients under the care of a rheumatologist for arthritis or *fibromyalgia*, use or have used magnets. Americans spend $500 million per year on therapeutic magnets, and $5 billion is spent worldwide!

Magnets produce energy known as *magnetic fields*, and are touted to improve symptoms from various diseases and conditions, predominantly chronic pain syndromes. The vast majority of those marketed directly to consumers are *static* (or permanent) magnets, meaning they have magnetic fields that are unchanging. The use of static magnets falls under the category of *complimentary and alternative* medicine (CAM), meaning that their use is not considered to be part of *conventional*, western medicine.

Other magnets, known as *electromagnets*, generate magnetic fields only when electrical current flows through them, and are used mostly under the supervision of health care professionals. There are some uses for *electro*magnets that do fall within conventional medicine and are approved by the FDA, such as accelerating the healing of fractured bones.

All magnets possess *polarity,* with the opposite powers of attraction strongest at each end. They come in widely variable strengths, measured in units called *gauss* (or "G"). As a frame of reference, the magnets marketed for pain relief are in the range of 300 to 5000 G, with refrigerator magnets varying from 35 to 200 G and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) machines produce up to 200,000 G. These static magnets can be found in bracelets, necklaces, and other jewelry, as well as shoe insoles, heel inserts, mattresses, bandages, belts, pillows, and headwear.

Interestingly, magnets have historically been used for centuries to treat pain. By the year 300 A.D., Greek doctors, including Hippocrates, were using magnets to treat arthritis and to stop bleeding. In the Middle Ages, doctors used them to treat gout, arthritis, poisonings, and even baldness! In the United States, magnets went into vogue just after the Civil War, using magnetic devices such as hairbrushes and insoles, as well as magnetic ointments and clothes. Healers marketed them as a means of restoring a person's magnetic fields, the depletion of which was thought to result in illness, for such conditions as paralysis, asthma, blindness, seizures, and cancer.

There are different theories concerning how magnets may exert their therapeutic effects, though none have been conclusively proven. It's been suggested that *static* magnets actually change how the body's cells function, possibly even restoring the balance between cell death and growth. Or, assuming blood is a conductor of magnetic energy by virtue of the iron it contains, magnets may increase the flow of blood, and therefore oxygen and nutrients, to affected tissues. Many believe that *electro*magnets may change how cells respond to pain, either in the nerves or in the brain itself, and/or exert their effects by increasing the temperature of the area under treatment.

The scientific evidence concerning the use of magnets is sparse and often inconsistent or controversial. The findings from some clinical trials, however, are promising if not conclusive. Several actually *do* suggest the use of magnets may indeed be useful to treat certain medical conditions, such as chronic pain from arthritis or other medical conditions. Whether or not this, in some cases, may represent a *placebo* effect is unclear. There is also very little information regarding the optimum strength for static magnets. One thing that *is* clear from reviews of the existing scientific literature is that much more research is needed.

The static magnets marketed to consumers are generally considered to be safe when used as directed, and side effects or complications have been extremely rare. However, there are certain circumstances where they're *not* recommended, specifically if you:

- are pregnant
- have an implanted medical device such as a *pacemaker*, *cardiac defibrillator*, or *insulin pump*
- use any patch that delivers medication through the skin
- have an *acute* sprain, infection, or skin wound

So, whether or not to consider using magnet therapy for those chronic aches and pains or other medical condition is not straightforward and certainly a personal choice, but may well be worth a try – that is, unless, you fall into one of the categories listed above. In fact, one of the greatest benefits of therapeutic magnets *may* be that people can reduce their use of oral pain medicines. Further, you can't overdose on static magnetic therapy, it's completely non-invasive, and they have a very small chance of causing significant side effects.

If you plan to purchase a magnetic bracelet, or other magnetic device, here are a few more words of advice:

- check the company's reputation and return policy
- magnet therapy is not advised as the sole treatment for potentially severe medical conditions, and shouldn't delay diagnosis or seeking other treatments
- if you experience *any* untoward side effects, you should immediately stop using them
- always inform your physician and all your health care providers, to ensure a safe, coordinated plan of care

Regardless of whether or not magnetic therapy has actually been scientifically proven to work, countless golfers, from amateur to professional, don't seem to be concerned by this and continue to swear by them. In the final analysis, as long as something is considered safe, has potential health benefits, can help your golf game, and works for *you*, then it may well be an "attractive" option.

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