

Appointment #5 YOUR ACHING BACK...

There is probably no one who has played Court Tennis more than a few times that has not complained of some form of backache. It is probably the most common physical complaint that I hear about. In fact, low back pain is most common cause of lost workdays in the USA. Back pain can range from a minor ache to a severely debilitating pain that can keep someone lying flat in excruciating pain for several days. Anyone who was at the Racquet Club in Philadelphia this past December will remember James Asher, the racquet pro, collapsing with back spasm and it took 8 of us to put him in a stretcher and carry him downstairs to a room where he convalesced for 2 days. In extreme cases, it can lead to the need for surgical intervention. Fortunately, most back pain can be treated conservatively and players can be assured that they have a lot of control over their own recovery course and prevention.

The back is the most complicated joint and the entire body. Each vertebrae is separated in the front by a disc and articulates with the bone above and below in the posterior column. Each level has its own unique motion segment. There are also an array of muscles and ligaments that attach to each segment. Diagnosing the cause of back pain is one of the most challenging jobs of a physician, even someone who specializes in spine. Most often, the pain comes from the soft tissue such as the muscles and ligaments. Sometimes back pain can be referred from another area of the body. Sometimes though, injury to the discs or bones is the cause. There are also times where someone is born with an anatomical weakness which can lead to the development of a painful back. The most common age range is 40-65, sometimes refer to as the 'weekend warrior' syndrome. Back pain though can happen at any age.

Court tennis presents unique circumstances that can put one's spine at risk. The solid floor puts a lot of stress on all the joints of the body, including the spine. The low bouncing ball forces the player to get lower for the majority of shots. Even with proper technique, this puts additional stress on the lower back. Accentuated body rotation to prepare for each shot also stresses the back.

Most everyone in this sport knows of someone who has had a hip or knee replacement secondary to the wear and tear they have endured. The spine is no exception. Fortunately, there are many things that you can do to minimize and prevent injury to your spine in other joints.

A good pair court shoes is a great place to start. There are many excellent brands that combine cushioning as well as lateral support. Your local pro can make several recommendations. It is also the one area where you can show off some interesting color schemes!

A proper warm up prior to playing is also essential. Too many times players will show up just in time to walk on court and start playing. This is a set up for strained muscles. It is wise to use the 5-10 minutes prior to playing raising your body temperature and getting the blood flowing as well as using a combination of static and ballistic stretching to prepare the body for battle.

Improving your form can never be understated. Most of us have some flaws and inefficiencies to our strokes and court movement that makes us more prone to muscle strains and potential injury. Often we bring habits from related sports such as squash and lawn tennis which help get us started in the game but ultimately hold us back from maximizing our potential as well as setting us up for potential pain.

As an example, I have done some recent training with Mike Gooding. Long sessions always leave me with a sore back. One of the 1st recommendations he made was to widen my basic stance on both forehand and backhand. Not only did this improve balance and leverage on the stroke but it also lowered my center of gravity to the ground and took some stress off of my lower back. After the 1st session, my back felt much better though my quadriceps were burning!

One other important factor is conditioning. Increasing strength and flexibility will not only help prevent injury but will also improved performance. The core muscles are the stabilizers of the lower back. These include the abdominal muscles and the oblique muscles. There has been a great surge an awareness of the core over the past decade. Modalities like yoga and Pilates have grown in popularity all over the world. Last year, Tim Chisholm suffered from severe back and leg pain. After breaking the pain cycle and working him up, we devised a conservative treatment plan centered around yoga. Not only has his pain resolved, but his fitness level is much improved. There are also many home exercise programs that are very effective. In essence, there is no excuse not to improve your core strength.

When back pain does we're its ugly head, it is important to immediately assess the degree of severity. There is a difference between being sore and being injured. One in doubt, always defer to safety and get a professional opinion. This is especially true if the back pain starts to radiate down the leg. While this could be nothing more than a strain, it could also represent a potential disc injury and needs to be evaluated.

So, get fitter, warm up, wear good shoes & refine your form. You will play better, hit more grilles, win more chases and hopefully have a less cranky back!!