

Boomeritis

Aging athletes find there are new ways to treat fitness injuries

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If you last learned about training, injury prevention or treatment in school a couple of decades ago, you're overdue for an update.

The aging baby boomer's fervour for fitness and unfortunate accompanying talent for wearing down joints and creating overuse injuries have spurred a flurry of new research in sports medicine and physiotherapy.

Treatment for a host of common ailments such as tendon pain, knee pain and osteoarthritis look nothing like they did a few years ago, says physician Karim Khan of Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute's Centre for Hip Health.

And increased understanding about overuse injuries means you can actively work to prevent trouble long before it hits. One key principle is muscle balance. As sport-specific muscles become strong, tight and overdominant, the opposing muscles become weaker, not just in comparison, but literally weaker, eventually leading to aches, pains and injury, says physiotherapist Carol Kennedy, a partner at Treloar Physiotherapy Clinic in Vancouver.

If you want to keep active long into old age, it is critical to strengthen and stretch not only the muscles needed for your favourite sport, but the opposing muscle groups as well.

"Ten years ago, in sports medicine, we wouldn't get someone over 60," Khan says. "Now one-third of patients are over 65. I had an 81-year-old patient in the clinic last week. He had knee pain getting back down from a very high mountain ascent. He said above the tree line was so dangerous because there's nothing to hang on to."

Here's a quick look at some of the newest ideas in overuse prevention and injury treatment:

Hockey

So you played hockey as a kid and now you're back. You push hard, sweat lots, and your legs and heart get a great workout.

There's just one problem. Ever notice how you bend forward when you're playing hockey?

You've been sitting in the office, bending forward all day, and now you're at the rink doing exactly the same thing. Your hip muscles are shortened in front because of all that sitting and forward bending. The result is short muscles in front of the hip and weaker



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Dr. Mary Hallowell plays at the Vancouver Lawn Tennis and Badminton Club. Racquet sports require strong legs, as well as strong arms and shoulders.

muscles at the back which in time, will lead to poor core control followed by groin strain or low back pain. The solution? Work some forward lunges into your day to stretch out your hips, Kennedy says.

Now what about your gut?

New research shows that hockey players need to strengthen their abdominals and butt muscles (gluteus medius) for rotational strength, Kennedy says. That's something your old high school coach didn't know to tell you. Sad to say, these muscles may no longer be strong enough for you to play at the level you were used to, and leaving them weak for too long will eventually affect your lower back.

Knee pain

Fixing knee pain is about timing, not strength, says Khan, co-author of Clinical Sports Medicine and a family practice associate professor at the University of British Columbia.

Patellofemoral syndrome is pain due to maltracking of the knee cap. Knee pain is one of the top reasons for visiting a sports medicine clinic and it's the most common muscle complaint in family practices, Khan says.

Yes, you need to strengthen the quad and thigh muscles, but the trick is to train the vastus medialis to kick in quickly.

"You've got to make the inside quad muscles contract early to pull the knee cap inwards, before the outside thigh muscles contract to pull it outwards," Khan says.

Soccer

Get jumping! Yes, of course you want to run, shoot and scoot that ball around obstacles, but one of the most common soccer injuries is an anterior cruciate ligament tear and the best way to hold that at bay is to learn to jump and land properly, particularly if you're female, Kennedy says.

Female soccer players are five times more likely to injure their knees than males. While the reason for this startling statistic is not yet clear, what prevents injury is to practise landing with your knees over your feet, with good use of your core, no wobbling and good absorption of the force throughout your whole leg, Kennedy says. Don't let those knees twist inward as you land.

You probably already have strong quadriceps on the front of your thighs, but do increase your hamstring strength to keep your leg muscles balanced, and remember to work your hip rotators because they help control your knee position and ultimately help prevent ACL tears, hip and knee pain.

Tendons

Gone are the days when a tendon problem was treated with anti-inflammatories and rest.

The new approach to treatment is nitro patches and exercise, Khan says. Tendon problems are now recognized not as an inflammatory condition, but a structural breakdown of the tendon, made up of strands of collagen.

The nitro patches are worn on the most tender spot for six months. Once the pain has settled down a bit, you need to start loading the tendon to stimulate it to repair. If you just rest, there is no stimulus for the tendon to repair itself, Khan says.

Mountain biking

You know all about cuts, scrapes and head-over-handlebar tumbles. But are you a mountain biker with "tension" headaches or a vaguely sore neck?

Mountain biking can lead to neck pain because the sport requires you to lean forward on the bike, with your head forward and chin poked out and up. And perhaps you've been at a desk all week with your head in the very same position.

Your headaches may actually originate from your neck, Kennedy says.

Check your bike setup. Something as simple as raising your handlebars could help.

New neck-specific core stability exercises developed over the last three or four years can help. Work on lengthening the muscles at the back of your neck, which have shortened because your head is always tipped back. Strengthen your core neck muscles, which are deep muscles at the front of the neck, with a gentle nodding exercise to offset that poked chin position, Kennedy says.

Osteoarthritis:

Got pain from osteoarthritis? Get out and exercise.

Osteoarthritis occurs when the cartilage between bones wears away, exposed bones rub together causing rough spots and pain and stiffness, usually affecting hands, knees and hips.

It sounds crazy to put loads on a joint that's damaged, but think of it this way, Khan says: when strong, your muscles are able to act as shock absorbers. Let the muscles weaken, and those bones will rub all the more.

For every 10 per cent you are overweight, you double your risk of early osteoarthritis, Khan says. There's been a marked increase in osteoarthritis among baby boomers in the past 10 years, likely due to overweight, and increased demand on aging bodies, Khan says.

Racquet sports

Racquet sports often lead us to overuse the front of the shoulder and underuse the back. This eventually leads to shoulder impingement problems, or a painful pinching in your rotator cuff. Strengthen your shoulder blades and stretch the front of your shoulder, Kennedy suggests.

Racquet sports may feel like an upper body sport, but don't forget to train your lower extremities as well, Kennedy says. Make sure you've got strong quadriceps so you can use a bent knee rather than a forward lean to get low shots. That lean can hurt your back, pull hamstrings and create achilles strain.

Running:

Most runners are well aware of what they need to do to balance their leg muscles, but don't forget the hips and lower core?

The hip and lower core help control the whole leg as it absorbs force from the ground, Kennedy says.

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