

Play at your own risk

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Taking up bowling or tennis is an excellent way to stay fit. But if you're not careful, you might find that these amateur sports can have unexpected long-term health risks.

A new study headed by Dr. Navah Ratzon, a long-time occupational therapist and director of the Occupational Therapy Department at Tel Aviv University, can be applied to any number of leisure sport activities. "Increasing numbers of adults are pursuing amateur athletics during their leisure hours. But we've found worrying indications that this activity — when not done properly — may have negative effects on the musculoskeletal system," she says.

In the United States, musculoskeletal disorders and disease are the leading cause of disability, and are the cause of chronic conditions in 50% of all people 50 years and older. Musculoskeletal complaints include discomfort, pain or disease of the muscles, joints or soft tissues connecting the bones.

Focusing specifically on bowlers, Dr. Ratzon and her graduate student Nurit Mizrachi found that 62% of the 98 athletes in their study reported musculoskeletal problems — aches and pains in the back, fingers, and wrist, for example. According to the study, recently published in the journal *Work*, the degree of pain a player reported was in direct proportion to the number of leagues in which the person participated. Their conclusion is that the intensity of the sport exacerbated the risk of long-term musculoskeletal damage.

The risks are particularly high in sports where the body is held asymmetrically and repetitive movements are made.

All ball sports should be played with caution, Dr. Ratzon advises, including sports like golf, basketball, tennis and squash. "Your body is meant to work in a certain way," says Dr. Ratzon. "If you jump for the tennis ball while twisting your back, you put too much stress on your body because it's an unnatural movement."

Stretching before playing sports is an obvious prevention method against long-term damage. But people should take other measures to keep their bodies fit. If you play baseball, tennis, or golf, Dr. Ratzon suggests that you balance this asymmetrical activity by alternating the use of your right and left arms before, during and after the game, at home or at the office.

"There is really a long list of things people should integrate into their mindset when playing amateur sports," says Dr. Ratzon, an expert on the risks of physical recreation. Other factors such as noise, poor weather, and lack of proper rest should also be considered, she says.

People should avoid stressing about their amateur sports activities, notes Dr. Ratzon. If they get anxious when they don't find time for the team each week and shut out other important aspects of their life, such as time with the family, the stress can exacerbate a predisposition to chronic health problems.

"It's important that the new activity integrates well into one's everyday life," says Dr. Ratzon, even if that means letting your teammates down once in a while. Amateur sports are meant to be fun and healthy for you. Some of her advice might keep both your swing and step in line for a long, long time.

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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