

TENNIS, ANYONE?



The sport of tennis is often saddled with a reputation for being a rather "dainty" game, thanks to the well-mannered fans who frequently grace the stands at professional tennis matches-not to mention the elite country clubs that typically provide tennis facilities. According to the American Chiropractic Association (ACA), however, the game of tennis can be not only an extremely physical challenge, but also a tremendously healthy endeavor.

"Tennis is a game that-if you start playing early and continue to play it-can actually reduce your risk of heart attacks because of the cardiovascular workout it provides," says Dr. Scott Bautch of the ACA's Occupational Health Council.

BENEFITS

One of the great things about playing tennis is that you only need to find one other person to play with in order to play a match. In fact, if you can find a tennis facility that has a tennis wall-or a wall with a horizontal line that simulates a tennis net-you can get a great tennis workout all by yourself.

"The combination of both high and low exertion levels that tennis offers can provide a unique exercise experience, as well as tremendous health benefits," says Dr. Bautch. In addition to helping to reduce your risk of heart attacks, playing tennis can also tone the muscles of your upper and lower body, burn calories, and improve your balance, hand-eye coordination and agility.

EQUIPMENT

Perhaps the most important element to beginning a tennis regimen is selecting the right equipment. Basic equipment includes proper tennis shoes, socks, appropriate attire and a good tennis racket. Dr. Bautch offers the following recommendations:

Shoes & Socks

Because of the constant pounding your feet will endure, it is critical to select a true tennis shoe. Don't purchase a shoe that is designed for basketball, running or cross-training. The shoe should be built low to the ground yet designed to be shock-absorbent to minimize stress on your feet.

"Socks are extremely important too," says Dr. Bautch. "Perspiration is a concern for tennis players, so look for socks that will help keep your feet dry." Some new synthetic fibers used in making socks are scientifically engineered to move sweat away from the body. The more traditional acrylic socks also work well in preventing perspiration buildup on the feet. Avoid cotton socks, as they tend to trap perspiration and hold it close to the skin. According to Dr. Bautch, "you should also consider a foot powder to help keep your feet dry. If your feet are wet, you have a greater chance of developing painful blisters."

Attire

While some professional tennis players may be able to get away with wearing tight-fitted clothing on the court, most of us need to exercise a bit more caution. Avoid wearing sports attire that pinches any part of your body. These "pinch points" can inhibit circulation, causing you to tire more quickly than normal. They can also cause uncomfortable blister marks and rashes. And just as with socks, skip the cotton apparel in favor of synthetic fibers that will absorb sweat and move it away from your body.

Racket

"Two important considerations when selecting a tennis racket are the size of the racket and your hand comfort when gripping the racket," explains Dr. Bautch. "Beginning tennis players often try to pick out an oversized racket to give them a better chance at hitting the ball. But with an oversized racket, you tend to catch the ball on the extreme edges of the racket, which can twist your hands and wrists beyond their normal range of motion. Look for a normal-sized racket instead."

The grip of your racket should be comfortably cushioned to absorb the shock that comes from hitting a tennis ball. The grip should also be thick enough so that your hand fits around it without having your thumb and fingers overlap one another.

HYDRATION

"Do not underestimate the importance of drinking water," urges Dr. Bautch. "When playing tennis, you lose a lot more fluids than you realize because a lot of your perspiration simply evaporates." According to Dr. Bautch, "water is your best choice for hydration. Whatever you do, don't drink sodas, because they actually

take more water from your body to push them out of your system than they put into your body."

To determine the optimal amount of water to drink in a given day, take your bodyweight and cut it in half. That figure represents the number of ounces of water you should drink. For example, if you weigh 100 pounds, you should try to drink 50 ounces of water per day.

SURFACES

Selecting a tennis court with a safe playing surface is another important step in starting your tennis program. Because your knees, hips and feet will take a pounding, surfaces that have some give-such as cushioned surfaces or even grass surfaces-are a better option than those made of concrete. Once you've selected an appropriate court, check it for trash, sand or other foreign objects. These unwelcome articles make it easy for you to lose your footing when practicing or playing.

LESSONS

Dr. Bautch recommends that beginning tennis players take tennis lessons, because lessons "teach good tennis habits and proper form, which will help take pressure off your wrists, spine and hips. It's important to learn to play the game correctly." If taking lessons is impossible because of financial concerns, scheduling conflicts or other reasons, there are many instructional aids available such as books, videos or DVDs. These products can be very helpful in familiarizing your body with the game of tennis.

AVOIDING INJURIES

In order to help prevent injury, it is critical to warm-up before practicing or playing. Dr. Bautch recommends that you "mimic the moves that you will make while playing, but do them more slowly and deliberately. Perform these moves through a full range of motion." You should also spend a few minutes rotating each of your legs, shoulders, hands and elbows in a slow, circular motion. Finally, move forward and back, then left and right, across your end of the tennis court, simulating the movements you would make when actually playing.

PAIN AND INJURY

Even when the best preventive measures are exercised, pain and injury can be an unfortunate fact of life with any sport-and tennis is no exception. Common tennis injuries include tennis elbow, shoulder injuries, low back injuries and turned ankles and knees. If you experience pain or injury beyond simple muscle soreness, make a doctor of chiropractic your first choice.