



**Ryan Sleik**

***The hardest part is taking the first step...***

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*Ryan & Joanna Sleik*



**Joanna Sleik**

## **STRETCH AWAY REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES**

***By: Joanna & Ryan Sleik***

Spring is here! And with it come many springtime activities that we enjoy such as golfing, bike riding and gardening. Starting with last month's article on Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, we plan to continue our tour of common injuries that affect our body but before we move on to the elbow (look for it in the June article) we thought we could discuss the importance of prevention and emphasize ways that we may be able to stop injuries from occurring in the first place. In general, many of the injuries that we face in the spring are the result of our body not being conditioned to perform the activities we engage in. Think of it as hibernation! We have been sleeping for most of the winter months and as the sun comes out and the days get longer we can't help but "overdo it." These repetitive strain injuries are often due to lack of practice and exposure to the task. For instance, we generally do not practice raking our entire yard so it is no wonder that our elbows and shoulders feel the effects. Similarly, we typically don't swing a metal rod at a small white ball all winter (unless you are lucky enough to fly south for the snowy months) and our arms, elbows and backs may definitely have something to say about it the next day!

One easy solution is to back off and not try to do so much in one day; or at least break up the activity into small parts if you are able to with frequent rest breaks in between. Although it goes without saying that if we only prescribed playing three holes of golf or mowing for ten minutes at a time we might be out of business! So let's try this: make a habit of warming up your body and preparing it for the activity ahead. Gently warm up your shoulders, wrists and elbows a few minutes before going outside and use your club or rake to do some gentle trunk twists, knee bends, and hip rotations to get you in your game. Because most activities, especially when they are new, tend to cause your muscles to contract and tighten, it is also very important to stretch during and after your activity. Stretching not only prevents our muscles from getting too tight, it can improve our flexibility and the range of motion in our joints as well as increasing circulation and relieving tension and stress. It is important that stretching is pain-free. It is normal to feel a pull or tension in the muscles, but if you are feeling pain, especially as you continue to stretch, stop and consult a physiotherapist or your doctor about it (you may just need a few hints on where to start). When stretching, it is important to breathe easy, not bounce, and hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds.

As we mentioned above many injuries occur due to the repetitive nature of our activities. These are globally referred to as "repetitive strain injuries." Examples include carpal tunnel syndrome, golfers or tennis elbow that we will cover next month, and "tendonitis" generally referring to inflammation of our tendons including the rotator cuff muscles in the shoulder, along the top of our thumb (DeQuervain's tendonitis), along the front of our knees (patellar tendonitis) or at the back of our ankles (achilles tendonitis) to name just a few. Tendons attach our muscles to the bone. They often do not have a great blood supply which means that they do not warm up easily and take a while to heal. An inflexible and cold tendon is more likely to become damaged from heavy activity, and repetition can cause small tears to occur. Inflammation (your body's natural response to damage) results as the fibers fray or become injured leading to pain and swelling. When you rest your body repairs the damaged tissue as best as it can but this process takes time. If not given adequate rest your body partially heals but usually not strongly enough to allow the tendon to be durable for more heavy or repetitive activity. Thus, if you go out and do the same thing over again you not only add more injury but also damage the repair job your body did the night before. This whole process is called tissue remodeling. Once your tissues rest and repair to the point that they are strong enough, further damage does not continue and the pain goes away. Most of us are familiar with this process, especially if you are a weekend warrior: you hurt like heck on Monday but as the weekend arrives you are ready for another round and with each weekend you become less and less sore!

Stretching helps tissue remodeling by stimulating your body to lay down new healing tissue in the right direction while it is repairing itself, helping make it more durable and less likely to become damaged. With the warm weather finally upon us (we hope!) we encourage you to spring safely into Spring: begin new activities gradually, listen to your body and allow it to rest adequately. Make sure you warm up appropriately and stretch during and after exercise to allow your tissues to adapt. Enjoy the sunshine and keep an eye out next month for tips on managing those egregious elbows!

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