

## Stay injury free on the pickleball court

Pickleball, the tennis-like sport that made a comeback in 2023, remains popular with older adults looking for a fun workout. But as people flock to the courts, health care experts are taking notice of an unintended consequence.

A recent report from financial services company UBS says pickleball injuries could cost Americans \$250-\$500 million in medical costs in 2023.

While the news shouldn't scare older adults away from physical activity, it's a reminder that people in their golden years need to take greater care during workouts than their younger counterparts, says [James Murphy, MD](#), an OSF HealthCare orthopedic surgeon

"We're not all sixteen years old anymore," Dr. Murphy says with a smile.

### Pickleball basics

Dr. Murphy says racket sports like pickleball involve a lot of side-to-side movement, bending and arm swings. Injuries like tendonitis, bone fractures in the wrist or hip, muscle tears and strains and even concussions can follow.

Before picking up pickleball or another sport as a hobby, older adults need to check the lights on the dashboard, so to speak.

"You want to see your internal medicine physician. Make sure your heart and everything else are good for strenuous activity," Dr. Murphy says.

People with a bad back or shoulder should also consider skipping the hard workout. If your health care provider advises so, try another, less taxing sport like golf. Or just take a walk around the neighborhood.

On game day, a good warm-up is a must, Dr. Murphy says. Gone are the recommendations for static stretches like touching your toes. Instead, look into dynamic warm-ups. You'll see high school and college athletes take this approach in the minutes before a game.

"They'll do a series of movements," Dr. Murphy explains. "Skipping-type exercises. Twisting exercises.

"The idea is you're firing all your muscle groups. Getting the blood flowing to those muscles so they're not more prone to injury when you start to compete."

Wear proper clothing, too. A knee or ankle brace may be part of the attire, as advised by a provider.

And then remember - it's a game. You're there to have fun.

"Going for every point like it's the final at Wimbledon isn't a good idea," Dr. Murphy jokes.

"It's meant to be for exercise and enjoyment. There's nothing less enjoyable than a torn Achilles tendon or a low back strain," he adds.

### After-care

After a pickleball game, Dr. Murphy advises not to jump right in the car. Take a short walk as a cool-down.

If you are injured, go to an urgent care for minor things like abrasions, strains and sprains. A call to 9-1-1 is needed for more serious concerns: chest pain, shortness of breath, a head or eye injury, a broken bone, a dislocated joint, a major wound or sudden dizziness, weakness or loss of balance. Choose an ambulance over driving yourself to the hospital. Seconds matter, and the ambulance can begin treating you at the scene.

"Don't ignore things," Dr. Murphy advises.

"If you tweak your shoulder playing pickleball, get it checked out. There's no reason not to. Get a quick X-ray and physical exam. Doctors can tell you, 'you just strained a muscle group' or it might be more serious. But you want to know before you do more damage by continuing to participate."

Your provider will come up with a treatment and recovery plan. Dr. Murphy says you may be back on the court in a week or several months depending on the ailment. But don't push yourself to return and risk re-injury.

### **About that injury report**

Dr. Murphy is quick to point out an omission in the UBS report on pickleball medical costs. It's one that drives home a key message like a shot to the opposite court.

"People who are active are *saving* millions of dollars in medical costs by not having diabetes, heart attacks or high blood pressure," Dr. Murphy says.

In other words: be mindful of injury risks, but stay active as you age.

### **Learn more**

Read more about [orthopedic care](#) on the OSF HealthCare website.