

More Sport – A Healthy Option

The recently released report *Australia's Health 2008* indicates that as a nation our general health has improved markedly over the last couple of years.

Life expectancy in Australia is second only to that in Japan. Death rates from cancer, heart attack and stroke are falling; and smoking rates are declining to be amongst the lowest in the world.

On the other hand, diabetes is on the increase – prevalence has doubled in the last 20 years. And new studies have shown we are now the fattest country in the world, having just overtaken the United States. Of course, obesity and diabetes are not unrelated.

Another area which, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report, needs to be addressed is physical inactivity. Certainly attention to diet and exercise should be the easiest way to halt the diabetes epidemic.

There's no doubt we Australians love our sport; we're almost spoilt for choices. But maybe there's too much spectating and not enough participating; especially as we get older.

However, to keep fit, our exercise doesn't have to be over vigorous; walking, swimming, cycling, dancing – whatever takes our fancy – whatever we enjoy most is going to suit us best.

For instance golf, one of Australia's most popular sports, has been described as just a way to spoil a good walk. Indeed the average golfer playing an 18-hole game walks about seven kilometres; however, a study from Sweden gives some justification for spending more time on the golf course.

A report in the *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sport* states that golfers have an annual decrease in mortality (chance of dying) of 40%. Apparently the lower handicap players have the greatest health benefits. The conclusion was the more golf the better.

With any activity there are risks as well as benefits. The risk from playing golf is low compared with other sports, but common golf injuries include injuries to the lower back, shoulder, elbow and wrist. Proper technique and warming up and cooling down exercises will reduce the risk to next to nothing.

Lawn bowls is another low impact sport, but even so, injuries do occur. Falls are the most frequent cause with most players over the age of 55. Osteoporosis is highly likely in this age group, so what would normally be simply a sprain or strain could result in a life threatening fracture.

Again, good preparation is important – warm up and stretch exercises, and skills and technique training to improve balance.

During the winter, it seems football dominates our thoughts. The primarily local codes of AFL and Rugby League take more column inches of the papers than probably all other sports put together; but with Rugby's international theme there's increasing interest in the third game with the oval ball; and Australia's move to the next phase of the qualifying rounds of the World Cup means Soccer is once again the focus of attention. Now, with the Olympic games less than two months away, there's a much wider range of sports for us to consider.

With regard to injuries while it's the high profile players who hit the headlines when they're suddenly out of action, in fact it's the amateur sportsmen and women amongst us who suffer the most. We just don't prepare well enough – injury prevention is not a sufficiently high enough priority.

Sports injuries don't have to happen. Most injuries suffered by amateur athletes are preventable. Some injuries, such as tennis elbow, are caused by faulty movement, but most sports injuries occur because the muscles are not conditioned.

To help us better understand the prevention strategies and to choose the most appropriate treatment, if an injury does occur, pharmacists around Australia have fact cards available on sports medicine topics such as *Exercises for Flexibility* and *Sprains and Strains*. They are part of the Pharmacy Self Care health information program developed by the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia.

Remember, you don't have to be in the Tour de France to fall off your bike. Similarly, if you're a weekend golfer or netball players, you're still at risk. However, prevention strategies will reduce the risk appreciably – check out the simple self-help tips on the Pharmacy Self Care fact cards.

To locate the nearest pharmacy providing the Self Care health information, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or check out the website www.psa.org.au