Golf is rapidly becoming the sport of choice for many Americans. While some view the sport as slow-paced, golf actually requires a great deal of strength and stamina, not to mention skill. While you may not have to be in the best cardiovascular shape to play golf, your muscles, particularly those of the legs and upper torso, must be both strong and flexible to keep your handicap below an embarrassing level.

THE KEY COMPONENTS

To be successful in golf there are three components of fitness that you should focus on: strength/power, flexibility and cardiovascular endurance. These also are the three most important components of any well-rounded fitness program.

STRENGTH AND POWER

Developing muscular strength and power is essential for generating club head speed, a determining factor in how far you can hit the ball. The box to the right lists specific exercises that will help you generate more power in your upper body as well as stabilizing strength in your lower body. One or more sets of eight to 12 repetitions of each exercise should be performed three days per week.

A recent study found this regimen to be extremely effective. As similar studies have shown, strength training brings about significant improvements in lean body weight, reduced body fat, increased leg strength and joint flexibility and a reduction in systolic blood pressure. But more important, at least to the golfers in this study, was the significant improvement in club head speed. The 17 exercisers studied increased the speed of their swing by an average of 5 mph. The control group experienced no such improvements.

CARDIOVASCULAR CONDITIONING

Finally, cardiovascular conditioning is essential to help you keep your energy up during a long round of golf. That conditioning can help you deal with the stress of making a crucial putt or of getting out of a sand trap. Try to fit in at least 20 minutes of walking, cycling or whatever aerobic activity you prefer, three times per week.

Improving your golf game requires a bit more than simply playing a lot of golf, but it doesn’t mean you have to spend hours in the gym. Try the exercises outlined here and you’ll not only come closer to par, but you’ll also reap numerous health benefits, such as increased lean body weight, reduced body fat, lower blood pressure and increased strength and flexibility.

While it may be difficult to motivate some people to stretch or begin strength training, telling them they might lower their handicap may be just the ticket to get them to head to the gym. Or work out at home. Whatever is most convenient. The point is to do it, regardless of whether it’s for health or for a better golf score.