

Pickleball injuries: pickleball elbow, sprains and eye hits, and eight ways to avoid them

Description

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Pickleball injuries are rising in Singapore, and the people getting hurt are often those who treat it as light exercise. SingHealthâ??s HealthXchange, citing a local news report, says some orthopaedic clinics here have seen about twice as many pickleball injuries as the year before, especially among adults over 40 who may already have joint or tendon problems.

â??Pickleball is a good way to stay active, but it still places real demands on the knees, ankles, shoulders and eyes,â?• said Dr Fadzil Hamzah, senior staff physician in the Department of Sport and Exercise Medicine at Changi General Hospital. â??Many people assume it is â??light exerciseâ?? and jump in without conditioning, proper shoes or technique, which increases the risk of injury.â?•

The injuries doctors are seeing

Most involve muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and joints, in both arms and legs.

- Pickleball elbow: pain on the outer side of the elbow from irritated forearm tendons, much like tennis elbow, brought on by repeated gripping and swinging
- Sprains and strains: ankles turned on an awkward landing, knees strained by sudden pivots or deep lunges, and hamstring or calf strains from sprinting or stopping suddenly
- Falls, which can end in wrist fractures or head injuries
- Eye injuries from being hit by the ball or a partnerâ??s paddle

Overseas data agree. In one study of emergency department visits, patients aged 50 and above made up nine in 10 pickleball attendances. Another found that 69 per cent of recreational players had at least one injury in a year.

Eight ways to cut the risk

- See your doctor before stepping up activity if you have heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis or old joint problems.
- Warm up for five to 10 minutes with brisk walking or light jogging on the spot, then leg swings, side steps, gentle lunges and arm circles. Afterwards, hold each stretch for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Train off the court two to three times a week: squats, lunges, step-ups, planks and wall push-ups for strength, plus single-leg stands for balance.
- Wear court shoes with grip and side support rather than running shoes, which are built for moving forwards. Pick a paddle grip that fits, because one too small or too large strains the wrist and elbow.
- Build up slowly. Beginners can start with one or two non-consecutive sessions of 30 to 45 minutes a week, and mix in walking, cycling, swimming or yoga.
- Learn to pivot your whole body instead of twisting a knee over a planted foot, and keep your knees slightly bent with your weight centred.
- Consider wrap-around polycarbonate eyewear, especially if you are 50 or older. Call loudly for the ball.
- On outdoor courts, drink before, during and after play and avoid late morning to mid-afternoon.

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Players greet each other over the net at Pesta Sukan 2025, July 2025. Photo: ActiveSG / Sport Singapore

When to stop, and when to see a doctor

Stop at once if you feel a sharp pain, a â??popâ?•, sudden swelling or cannot move a joint normally. For a minor sprain or strain where you can still bear some weight, use RICE: rest for the first 24 to 48 hours, ice for 15 to 20 minutes at a time several times a day, a compression bandage if advised, and keep the limb raised.

Get medical help quickly for any of these:

- You cannot walk or put weight on the leg or ankle
- Major swelling, bruising or a visibly deformed limb
- Severe or worsening pain in the knee, hip, shoulder, elbow or wrist
- Sudden loss of vision, eye pain, flashing lights or a dark curtain across your sight
- Chest pain, breathlessness, dizziness or fainting on court

Getting back on court

Most pickleball injuries heal without surgery. Once a doctor or physiotherapist clears you, start with gentle rallies without full lunges or jumps, move on to practice games before competitive play, and leave at least one rest day between sessions. Then fix the cause, whether that was long hours without rest, worn shoes or skipped warm-ups.

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This article is general information, not medical advice. If you are injured or unsure whether you are fit to play, see a doctor.

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