

Get in the swing



A few adaptations can make this sport a great way to stay fit.

by Stephanie Stephens



To manage symptoms of heat intolerance, Heather Drew, a professional golfer who has

relapsing-remitting MS, wears a hat and drinks a lot of water when playing golf. Photo by Rick Sharp

As spring temperatures rise and grass gets greener, golfers flock to the links. Whether you played before your multiple sclerosis diagnosis or yearn to learn it now, golf is a highly adaptable sport—no matter your level of ability.

Heather Drew knows a true golfer never wants to leave the game behind. A 16-year competitor on the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour, Drew first picked up clubs in 1970 at age 10. In 1996, she noticed “something funny” with her right leg while she was playing golf. This nagging symptom later led to her diagnosis of relapsing-remitting MS.

But Drew, who is now 55, still loves to golf and, when she qualifies, plays in the LPGA Legends Tour—the senior arm of the tour—and caddies when she doesn’t. To stay focused on the game, she has developed strategies for managing her most troublesome MS symptoms.

Freelance golf writer Tony Dear, 44, of Bellingham, Washington, who was diagnosed with MS at age 18, is another who can’t get enough of the sport, the surroundings and the camaraderie. “When my MS symptoms kick in, I can’t play as well as I used to. It was frustrating at first, but now I appreciate what I have and enjoy the game every bit as much as I used to,” he says.

‘Links’ to movement

If your doctor approves, golf can be a good form of physical activity, says certified personal trainer Jeffrey Segal of Boca Raton, Florida, who was diagnosed with MS at age 25. Now 42 and an avid golfer, Segal tells clients with MS that research shows exercise contributes to improved fitness, strength, cognition, mood and sense of well-being. “Activity may also reduce muscle spasticity and co-contractions, and increase range of motion,” he says. People who exercise regularly also may experience improvements in fatigue.

Segal says golf is easily adaptable for many MS symptoms. “You may not hit your lifetime best score, but if you stay active, it may help you maintain your game,” he says. Following are Segal’s and others’ strategies for managing symptoms and staying up to par.

- **Fatigue.** For this common symptom, “You have to work around it and not through it,” says Segal. “Go to the driving range instead of navigating the whole course, play fewer holes or just putt. Adapt so you don’t set yourself up for failure.” Also take advantage of motorized carts.
- **Heat intolerance.** “If the temperature is above 75 degrees, I know I shouldn’t play then,” Dear says. “It’s cooler at sunup or sundown. And besides, at those times the course is always quiet and is at its most beautiful.” On the LPGA tour,

Drew can't always choose her tee times. "I aim for the shade whenever possible, and whether caddying or playing, I always wear a hat and drink lots of water," she says. "When you play in the heat, you have to be doubly aware of what's going on with your body, and do things the right way for yourself."

Dear also recommends taking advantage of heat-reducing apparel like a cooling neck wrap or Columbia's Omni-Freeze Zero line of shirts, visors and neck gaiters with sweat-activated cooling. (For more on cooling products, visit MomentumMagazineOnline.com/cool-product-guide.)



- **Reduced mobility/balance.** "I haven't been able to walk a course for 15 years," Dear says, "but I'd rather play bad golf using a cart than no golf at all." Many people—even those without disabilities—choose to use a motorized cart, and they still get the benefits of playing the holes. An increasing number of courses have accessible, single-rider carts that are operated with hand controls and have swiveling seats so golfers don't need to leave the cart to play. (To find a course near you equipped with such carts and other accessible features, visit mobilitygolf.com.) If you want to walk the course but don't have the strength, balance or desire to carry your clubs, try a lightweight push or pull cart that's strong on portability and playability. Some even have battery-powered motors. Many golf courses also have caddies for hire. They not only carry clubs, but also can give you golf tips—and can go for help in the event of a problem. Once you arrive at the teeing ground, it's time to focus on position, says Segal. "Stability is important in golf," he notes. "Find your center of gravity, then stand with knees slightly bent and buttocks slightly out, like a tennis player waiting for a serve."

If you're worried about losing your balance when you tee up or retrieve the ball,

consider using a device such as the Golf Claw, Joe's Original Backtee or the Pick-Up Putter, which allow you to place and pick up your ball from anywhere on the green, or inside the cup, so you don't have to bend over.



There are solutions for people with reduced grip strength, says Jeffrey Segal, an avid golfer who has MS. If you have a poor grip, wear a glove with a loop or strap to lock the club in place, he recommends. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Segal

Even with such helpful devices, players with MS may have difficulty with depth perception—judging the length and position of a shot—and with accurate perception of their own position in space. “This may increase the likelihood of a fall,” Segal says. “If that’s a concern, play golf with a partner who can help guide you in either situation.”

- **Reduced grip strength.** Compromised grip strength isn't a deal-breaker, Segal says. In fact, you don't want to grasp a club too hard. “Just grip so the club could almost be pulled from your hand. It gives you more of a true ‘feel.’ ” If you have a poor grip, he recommends wearing a glove with a loop or strap to lock the club in place. This allows you to have a firm hold throughout the swing. Options include the Powerglove, Eagle Claw and Quantum Grip.

- **Low vision.** There's no need to rely on hard-to-see white balls. Golf balls come in a rainbow of bright colors, such as those made by Chromax, Volvik or Vision.

Help 'fore' golfers

If country clubs and private golf courses are financially off-limits, you can probably still hit the links. Many counties and cities own courses where you may be able to play for as little as \$30 a round. To find a professional who can help you succeed at golf, visit the following websites:

- [Adaptive Golf Association](#)
- [American Disabled Golfers Association](#)
- [United States Disabled Golf Association](#)
- [Disabled Sports USA](#)

Stephanie Stephens is a California-based multimedia journalist specializing in health and lifestyle topics.

For more on staying active with MS, check out the following stories: [Yoga for MS](#), [Walk this way - Nordic style](#), [Keep moving with MS](#) and [Should you try aquatic therapy?](#)