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I MIND, BODY, WONDER I

Pickleball is everywhere. Here's why the fast-growing sport is good for your health.

Once thought of as a backyard sport for retirees, the popular activity actually has several physical and mental benefits for all ages.

Utah business owner Ed Wertz was looking for a way to stay active after his gym closed early in the pandemic. His wife suggested they try pickleball for a date night one evening. "We've played two to three times a week ever since," the 71-year-old says.

The couple join the more than 36 million Americans playing what has become the fastest-growing sport in the United States for three consecutive years.

"In a relatively short time, pickleball has already reached the levels of running, basketball, biking and golf in popularity—and the wide age range of people now playing indicates its growth will likely continue," says Jim Edwards, a physical therapist and rehabilitation manager at Cleveland Clinic Rehabilitation & Sports Therapy in Ohio.

Originating in the United States in 1965, pickleball is a racquet sport that combines elements of tennis, badminton, and ping pong. Played either one on one (singles) or two on two (doubles) on a 20 x 44-foot court (for comparison, tennis courts are 27 feet wide x 78 feet long), players use a solid ping-pong like paddle to hit a hollow, perforated plastic ball back and forth over a net.

As fun as participants say pickleball is to play, the sport's primary benefit may be that it's good for the body and the mind.

"Pickleball truly is a whole-body workout that improves cardiovascular health, assists with weight loss, and can help with balance, coordination, and flexibility," says Matthew Anastasi, a physician and sports medicine specialist at Mayo Clinic. "It also provides a great opportunity for socialization and can reduce stress and provide mental health benefits."

Once thought of as a leisurely backyard activity for seniors and retirees, data shows the average age of participants is now 35—with younger and younger players joining every year.

"We now have people of all ages engaging in it, including celebrities like Taylor Swift, George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Billie Eilish," says Emily Hemendinger, a psychiatrist and outpatient clinical director at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. Even star athletes like Patrick Mahomes, Serena Williams, LeBron James, and Tom Brady have publicly touted their love of the sport.

WHY PICKLEBALL IS GOOD FOR SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Independent of its trendiness or newfound fame, pickleball provides great social and mental health benefits. For one, because the game is not confined by age or gender, it's known to improve social lives by bringing people of many backgrounds together.

"Men frequently play against women, and kids commonly play with parents and grandparents—dynamics not necessarily seen in other sports or activities, which definitely makes pickleball unique," says Lance Dalleck, an exercise and sports scientist at Western Colorado University.

The regular social interaction that is common to pickleball both while playing and as participants rotate courts and partners is one reason multiple studies show the game reducing feelings of loneliness, decreasing depressive symptoms, and increasing life satisfaction.

"These benefits are especially important among older adults as they are more likely to be isolated and experience depression and anxiety," says Hemendinger.

Indeed, one study measured multiple levels of connection among seniors and found that "the highest connection levels occurred in those who played pickleball multiple times a month for at least one year," explains Michael Fredericson, a physician and the director of the Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation division at Stanford University.

The sport also helps with mental agility.

"Pickleball aids cognitive functions such as reaction times, cognitive flexibility, and complex thinking," says Hemendinger. It accomplishes this, she explains, because each fast-paced game requires players to hold multiple concepts at once such as proper positioning and technique, anticipating where the ball or your teammate is going to be, and constantly having to react to your opponent—all while being mindful of server rotation, court rules, and staying on top of a complex scoring system. "You have to keep the big picture and many details in mind in order to be successful," she says.

Despite these layers of focus and concentration; the social, fun, and competitive components of the sport have been shown to help people better manage emotions and stress and anxiety levels.

"We encourage exercise, in part, because it helps to release endorphins and hopefully distracts from the stressors of our lives," explains Edwards. He says pickleball accomplishes these goals and more, "making it a useful tool for improving mental health.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS ABOUND

Pickleball's physical benefits are no less compelling.

"Pickleball is a great workout for the whole body as it works both lower and upper extremities," says Hemendinger.

This includes building and toning lower-body muscles like hamstrings, glutes, quadriceps, and calves; plus upper body ones like triceps, pectorals, deltoids, the erector spinae, and all core muscles. Various muscle groups may be affected "every time you run, jump, or move in different directions because each movement promotes positive adaptations throughout bodily structures," says Landon Uetz, an Arizona-based physiotherapist who specializes in treating and coaching pickleball players.

These movements also improve joint and bone health and burn between 200-300 calories per 30-minute game—36 percent more calories than steadily walking the same amount of time. Pickleball also gets the blood pumping, as research shows that a person's average heart rate during a game qualifies the sport as a moderate-intensity workout, providing "improved cardiorespiratory fitness, lower blood pressure, and a better cholesterol profile," says Dalleck, who co-authored the study.

Edwards also praises pickleball for helping with hand-eye coordination and aiding in neuromuscular communication, better posture, and improved balance. "Eventually we are coordinated enough to hit a dink or a smash, maybe even put some spin on a serve or return shot," he says.

These benefits are especially beneficial in those 65 and older; individuals most affected by lower activity levels as aging occurs. "The combination of aging plus inactivity can accelerate the decline in fitness levels, which can markedly increase the risk for various chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease," explains Dalleck.

His research team investigated this age group specifically and learned that the average senior pickleball participant increased their cardiorespiratory fitness levels by about 12 percent. "This improvement carries important benefits as each 10 percent improvement equates to a 15 percent reduced risk for cardiovascular disease mortality," he explains. It's one reason, he says, "that the middle-aged and older adult populations might potentially have the most to gain by picking up an activity or sport such as pickleball."

INJURIES ARE COMMON

But it isn't all good news as injuries related to the sport do occur and have, unsurprisingly, risen with the growing number of participants. From 2013 through 2022 in the U.S., for instance, "there was a total of 12,021 estimated pickleball injuries," says Fredericson. He says the wrist is the most common injury location, accounting for about 70 percent of needed medical interventions.

Anastasi has treated many pickleball-related injuries, "ranging from simple muscle strains and sprains to lacerations, fractures, and shoulder dislocations, plus everything in between." To avoid or reduce such issues, he suggests, "players need a relatively good baseline balance, because there is a lot of forward, backward, and lateral movement."

He also recommends wearing proper footwear and encourages players to stretch before and after each game.

And because pickleball involves hitting "a hard polymer ball at speeds up to 30 mph to 40 mph, protective eyewear is recommended," adds Fredericson.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Most community centers and pickleball clubs offer beginner classes and even one-on-one coaching, which is a good place to begin.

Wertz advises against buying an expensive paddle until you learn the game and says to be patient with your progress. "Though it has a much shorter learning curve than most sports, it can take a few games to get a handle on things, so never get discouraged if you're struggling—we've all been there."

Uetz suggests practicing a few times and familiarizing yourself with the rules and basic techniques, then showing up at the courts when others are playing to observe and jump in.

"Whether you end up playing for 10 minutes or until the sun goes down," echoes Hemendinger, "you're likely to get a great workout—both physically and mentally."

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