

Match fit

With the women's Tour hit by injury, the WTA's Michelle Gebrian advises on maintaining peak health on court.

The WTA's Michelle Gebrian is used to treating top players, such as Lindsay Davenport (right), when something goes wrong with their fitness during a match. Here, she advises *ace* readers on four key problems that can strike during a match – how to identify them, how to best avoid them and how to manage the athlete's healthcare on the court. Interview by Gavin Versi.

Dehydration

"We give a lot of educational information to the players about dehydration, especially at hot and humid tournaments, such as the US Open and events in Asia. We recommend that players hydrate one-and-a-half to two hours before their match. Sports drinks such as Gatorade, or similarly electrolyte-rich fluids, have some of the key ingredients that you need to replenish in your body such as potassium and sodium.

"This is in addition to drinking water. You should drink until your urine is clear; if it's not clear then you're still dehydrated. During the match you want to drink two to three gulps of a sports drink and two to three gulps of water during each change of end. We also

recommend that in hot and humid environments you salt your food, because sodium is what you need to keep inside your body so that you don't get dehydrated.

"Make sure you are stretching appropriately, because in hot and humid conditions, if you're dehydrated, you're more prone to cramping. Clothing is very important too. You shouldn't wear cotton clothing, because cotton tends to weight down on you when you get sweaty. You should choose a moisture-wicking cloth, such as a dry-fit type fabric. The shirt – and skirt for women – should be light coloured, so they reflect the heat instead of absorbing it.

"A mesh hat is far better than a cotton hat, for the same reasons as above. You should wear moisture-wicking socks, too. If you have wet clothing you can't dissipate your heat or have the sweat come off you as easily.

"Sunscreen of SPF30 or more should be used to guard against skin cancer. It needs to be reapplied frequently because as you sweat and wipe that sweat off with a towel you lose the effect of the sunscreen."



Cramping

"Ninety per cent of cramping on the professional Tour is due to dehydration. Prevention is of course essential. But if you do start to cramp then stretching the muscles is important, holding out the stretch for about 30 seconds. If you don't have access to a trainer then self-massage is a good idea

too. If you're cramping you are probably overheated or dehydrated. Putting ice bags under your armpits and in the groin area is a good idea, as it helps to cool the body because there are lymph nodes there."

Blistering

"Prevention is of course most important. Again, the socks are crucial: use a dry-fit material as cotton absorbs the sweat, and sweaty socks cause friction against your skin, which results in blisters. It's important to change your socks when they're wet and have shoes that fit you properly – if they're too tight in an area you will get blisters.

"As far as treatment is concerned, on the WTA Tour we have invented the 'doughnut'. It's easy to teach: you take some foam (about 3mm/1/4in thick, available at chemists), cut it into a strip and then make it into a circle and apply it to the area of the blister that is not tender, kind of enveloping the blister. You should

STRETCH SCHOOL

Part seven of our monthly guide to dynamic stretching...

Heel Flicks

The aim of this drill is to stretch the quadriceps and activate the contraction mechanisms of the hamstring. It will also help raise the heart rate. Run across the court kicking the left heel up behind so that it touches your buttocks. Repeat three times then swap legs, ensuring you use good arm mechanics. Maintain good posture and look ahead. The heel flick needs to be as quick as possible, but controlled. With thanks to Danny Holdcroft, USA Bath Academy Strength and Conditioning Coach.





MICHELLE GEBRIAN: Factfile

Michelle Gebrian is a licensed physical therapist and certified athletic trainer who has been working as a Primary Health Care Provider on the WTA Tour since 1999. Michelle received her Bachelor of Health Science degree at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, USA and her Master of Physical Therapy degree at Shenandoah University in Virginia. Aged 32, she has spent the past five years travelling internationally on the Tour, treating players from a wide variety of countries, with rankings at all levels - including Serena Williams, pictured right. She is also the Coordinator of Therapeutic Exercise for the WTA Tour, and is responsible for overseeing the rehabilitative aspect of the athletes' healthcare on the road.



seal the foam with a very light tape. It's the most effective way to relieve the pressure. Normal plasters tend to put pressure on the blister, which is not advisable. You should never pop your blisters either, because that could lead to an infection and further pain.

"If your hands blister when you're playing frequently you should use sawdust or chalk, similar to gymnasts, to help absorb the moisture. If your hands are sweaty you're likely to blister, as well as lose control of the grip. Methylated, or surgical, spirit can be used to harden the skin and discourage blistering, but you shouldn't use it over a long period because it can irritate the skin."

Injuries

"Most injuries - for example wrist and knee - are caused by decreased core stability, which leads to poor technique. The core is defined as the shoulders and upper back, the trunk and the gluteal areas. If you have a strong and stable core it's going to

alleviate a lot of the pressure on your back, and by developing those deep abdominal stabilising muscles it will take the stress off your joints. It will also lead to a better technique and more power on the court, as well as making you less prone to injury.

"If you do have back pain you should get medical advice as soon as possible. The service action will only make it worse. Often in club players we see back injuries caused by players not using their legs enough to get down to the ball, so you should really look at using your knees more rather than extending your back.

"A lot of on-court injuries can be treated by massage or icing, depending on your pain levels. If you hear a click or pop you should stop immediately. Any injury that causes swelling or heat is likely to be serious, and playing through it will most probably make it worse. Increased motion in a joint is also an identifying factor as to when to stop - again, you are likely to be making the injury worse." □

Spain's Anabel Medina Garrigues is forced to retire injured from her match against Monica Seles during the Australian Open in 2002.



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