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RISKS IN RAIN AND SHINE

By Bill Pennington

Golf is good for your health -- for the exercise, the fresh air and the socialization benefits. Heck, doing the math as you try to keep track of all the side bets is good stimulus for the brain.

But we can get too much of a good thing, and I'm not talking about hand calluses or back spasms. Dangerous extremes lurk on the golf course. Two golf hazards not discussed nearly enough are the risk of [skin cancer](#) from sun exposure and the peril of lightning.

If you play enough golf, you are regularly exposed to both.

Dermatologists say golfers are notoriously poor at protecting themselves from sun damage and frequently need treatment for harmful lesions on ears, hands and noses. And in a typical year, lightning kills more people than tornadoes or [hurricanes](#). A golf course is an especially dangerous place during a thunderstorm because it has isolated, tall trees and wide-open spaces where golfers can be the tallest target.

No one is advocating we play less golf. Every other year, a



study comes out proving that golfers tend to live longer. But there are groups trying to get the golf populace more aware, and wary, of these two weather-related threats.

For several years, the Women's Dermatologic Society has conducted free skin cancer screenings at select [L.P.G.A.](#) events across the nation, with doctors examining fans, caddies and volunteers.

"About 45 percent of the people we see at those screenings have something on them that's going to have to be treated, and that's a much higher incidence rate than the general populace," said Dr. Marta Rendon, a South Florida dermatologist

who has participated in about a dozen of the golf tournament screenings. "We see skin cancers and a lot of precancerous spots. The screenings have saved a lot of lives."

Dr. Wendy Roberts, the president of the society, has her practice in Rancho Mirage, Calif., a Palm Springs Valley community known for its many golf courses. She said specific problem areas for golfers included the back of the hand not usually inside a golf glove and the lips, which should be protected by balm with sun block.

"Men also completely forget about their ears, and they miss the patch of skin on the side of their neck just below the ear," Roberts said. "I remove a lot of cancers from that spot."

She added: "I have golfers tell me that they're being careful because they wear a hat or a visor, but when I ask if they put sunscreen on their legs, they say they didn't think of that because they're in the golf cart a lot. But the leg is the No. 1 site for [melanoma](#) in a woman and No. 2 in men."

The L.P.G.A. has a sun-safety initiative, and many of its players preach the sun-protection gospel. The Women's Dermatologic Society has been a partner with the help of a grant from L'Oréal USA and has created [a Web site with golf sun safety tips, playsafeinthesun.org](#).

One tip that struck me was to reapply sunscreen every nine holes. If you think about it, if you were exercising on a beach for five straight hours, would you apply sunscreen just once?

Being safe from lightning on the course asks golfers to do something they usually hate to do: stop playing, at least temporarily. And that may be why many golfers are struck. They might see a storm on the horizon, but it's not raining yet and they haven't seen lightning. Sure, there was the distant rumble of thunder, but gee, they think, I'm playing so well today. Or, it took me two months to get this tee time.

"Every thunderstorm has its first flash of lightning, and that

one is as deadly as all the others," said John Jensenius, a [National Weather Service](#) lightning safety expert.

Lightning often strikes 10 miles from any rainfall and can strike ahead of storms or seemingly after they have passed. Jensenius said golfers should examine the sky and plan.

"On a golf course, you usually have a good view of a coming storm, and if you hear any thunder, you should head inside a building or a hard-topped car as soon as you can get there," Jensenius said. "I study the case histories of all lightning fatalities. Often, if people had gotten inside 5 or 10 minutes earlier, they would be alive. All the cases are very sad; these are good people who make a mistake."

Jensenius said golf clubs and other metal objects do not attract lightning and that getting in the cart would not protect you. The rubber tires do not help, he said. Lightning victims, for example, are struck and injured riding lawn mowers. Cars are safe, he said, because they have metal roofs and sides.

"There isn't anywhere on a golf course that's safe, and that goes for rain shelters or huts that aren't sturdy

structures built to withstand a lightning strike," Jensenius said.

The National Weather Service offers safety guidelines and suggestions [online at lightningsafety.noaa.gov](#). A majority of lightning victims are children or men younger than 40, which suggests to Jensenius that behavior or peer pressure plays a significant factor in who gets struck. About 85 percent of victims are men.

"Being safe is inconvenient," he said. "I'll add that most people struck by lightning do not die, but most are left with lifelong neurological problems."

We talk in golf about playing safely or making the safe play in a given situation. If you're like me, you've rushed to the first tee without putting on sunscreen or stayed out an extra hole or two, trying to ride out a thunderstorm. It may seem innocent, not perilous.

But these are clearly risks not worth taking.