

Get healthy with pickleball

What is pickleball?

Pickleball has been the fastest growing sport in America since 2020. It has grown in popularity because most ages, body types, and skill levels can play. It is an easy, affordable, accessible, fun, social, and friendly game that combines badminton, ping-pong, and tennis features. You play with a large paddle and plastic ball on an indoor or outdoor court similar in size to a badminton court with a net, like that in tennis. Beginners can learn quickly, and many become core players. Core players participate in official events eight or more times a year. . Matches are played as singles or doubles and last approximately 15 to 25 minutes. Each match consists of three games, with the winner declared after the best two out of three. The average age of a core pickleball player is 38.1 years old, but pickleball has long been tied to older adults and retirees. The majority of core pickleball players are 55 or older and more than a third are 65 or older. SilverSneakers reports older adults are drawn to pickleball for a variety of reasons:

- The courts are smaller and require less running than tennis (four pickleball courts fit in one tennis court).
- The game is easy to learn and score. It can evolve into a more fast-paced competitive match for more experienced players.
- The game is familiar because it is like other racquet sports.
- The game is designed to be fun and carefree.
- The game is social and is associated with less frustration than some other sports.
- The game encourages physical and social activity as well as a sense of personal proficiency.
- There are lots of opportunities to play through open play, leagues, clubs, senior and recreation centers, etc.



The game attracts active older adults because it is easy to find courts and people with whom to play. You can search for local clubs and courts by zip code through the USA Pickleball Association website: <https://usapickleball.org>. The USA Pickleball Association posts a downloadable rulebook and official rules packet as well as helpful videos that cover game basics and beyond at <https://usapickleball.org/what-is-pickleball/how-to-play>.

The physical, mental, and social benefits of pickleball

Harvard Health and SilverSneakers agree that pickleball can be an ideal sport for older adults because it enhances physical, mental, and social activity.

Physical health

Pickleball makes exercise fun, and people are more likely to enjoy fun activities. An article published in the International Journal of Research in Exercise Physiology shows that playing one hour of pickleball



According to USA Pickleball, three dads invented the game in 1965 to help their children fight summer boredom.

three days a week for six weeks can improve blood pressure, cholesterol, and cardiorespiratory fitness. Because pickleball involves moderate exercise, various reports attribute the benefits of pickleball to weight management and weight loss, managing diabetes, improving cardiovascular health and muscle strength, and keeping bones strong. Other research shows that pickleball can improve hand-eye coordination, which can help with daily activities like eating and driving, and improve reflexes and balance, which contributes to independence and fall prevention.

Mental health

Exercise in general can help reduce stress and improve mood. Research shows that exercising the brain can enhance memory and help preserve cognitive function. Pickleball stimulates the mind because it requires quick thinking and strategizing. Other research has found that pickleball reduces depression, increases self-esteem, and enhances a sense of purpose.

Social health

Pickleball brings people together. It encourages people to play casually with family, friends, and neighbors as well as to meet new people who are interested in the sport. When people are social, they are less likely to feel lonely or socially isolated. The fun aspect of pickleball also keeps people coming back. It is a carefree activity that encourages laughter and competition. Playing with others encourages accountability and can contribute to a sense of purpose. For example, the dependence upon showing



up to play against or with someone else. Positive social experiences with pickleball can influence ongoing exercise habits.

Safety concerns: Don't get yourself in a pickle

Because pickleball is fun, social, played on a smaller court, and in senior centers, some perceive it to be a milder, low-impact, low-risk sport. However, it can be physically challenging and like any sport, it does pose several safety and injury concerns. Because the game can evolve into long volleys, quick steps, back-peddling, and lots of starting, stopping, and switching directions at the net, playing can lead to falls and injury. Falls are one of the leading causes of injury and injury-related death among adults aged 65 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Older adults who are less physically agile (having impaired balance or difficulty making quick turns) need to be careful while playing pickleball.

The USA Pickleball Association (USAPA) formed in 2005. Today it has more than 53,000 members.

The name pickleball comes from the sport of rowing where the slowest craft is the “pickle boat.” Other accounts report the game is named after co-founder Joel Pritchard’s dog, Pickles. Pickles was known to run off with the ball while the game was still being played!

While research does recommend learning to fall properly to be prepared in case you do fall (rolling with a fall versus extending a hand to break a fall can result in fewer upper extremity issues), all falls involve injury risks including head trauma.

Sports medicine experts report injury to the rotator cuff is a common pickleball complaint. This type of injury can cause pain and weakness in the arm, particularly at the shoulder joint. It can even prevent arm movement. Other injuries connected to pickleball (and other racquet sports) include sprains and strains to muscles, tendons, and joints; broken bones; bruises and cuts; injuries to the knee; aggravation of arthritis; low back pain; plantar fasciitis; distal extremity fractures (forearm, wrist, hand, foot, ankle); and head or facial trauma including eye injuries.

Players should stretch and properly warm up before any activity. USA Pickleball provides a list of exercises to help reduce injuries at <https://usapickleball.org/membersnewsletter/pickleball-fitness-exercises-to-help-reduce-injuries>.

Players should wear protective eyewear, appropriate athletic court shoes, and research options for wrist and ankle braces. Use a proper paddle and grip because gripping a paddle too tightly or volleying with a paddle that is too heavy can cause injury to the elbow.

It is important to take frequent breaks and keep hydrated. It can also be helpful to ice sore spots after a match to help with recovery.

If preexisting conditions and/or concerns are present, consult a health-care professional before playing. Visit a health-care professional if pain worsens with activity, lasts for more than 24 hours, causes changes in gait, or forces modification of other activities.

Conclusion

Pickleball is meant to be fun, social, and active, but, like many sports, it can sometimes be frustrating, especially if you are not catching on like you would like. Remember, a bad attitude is not helpful for you or those around you. By keeping your expectations realistic, you can reduce stress and/or frustration and anger. Remind yourself that like anything new, you need to practice — and have fun!

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