

Three hours of tennis every week can cut the risk of developing heart disease by

50%

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A workout for the mind and body

Photo: Jessica Shapiro

For a sport that evokes tennis whites, strawberries and cream and dodgy headbands, tennis is surprisingly **one of the best all-over workouts**. "Tennis uses all your senses," says Craig Morris, former coach of Samantha Stosur and now participation manager at Tennis Australia. "You hear the ball come off the racquet, watch the ball spin towards you, move constantly towards it, just like netball, jump up to reach the ball or to serve, in the same action as swimming, and use your legs in the same way as footballers do."

Aaron Kellett, physical performance manager at Tennis Australia, says tennis can help you become fitter and stronger, boost your cardiovascular strength and burn kilojoules. It will also tone your legs, stomach, and arms. Research at the Miller Family Heart and Vascular Institute in the US found three hours of tennis every week could cut the risk of developing heart disease by 50 per cent.

Players have also been found to have improved aerobic fitness, a lower body-fat percentage, a more favourable lipid profile, a lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease and improved bone health.

What happens when you play

Just aiming to hit a tennis ball challenges your fitness level and focus. "As you run to hit the ball, initially you have a perception of where the ball is," Kellett says. "As your mind reads the cues from your opponent, your body has to react, which it does by telling your feet to move." As your body reaches to hit the ball, imagine a piece of rubber that is compressed and twisted. As you release it, it rotates quickly, generating force.

"All the energy for swinging the tennis racquet begins from the ground up, as you load the lower body by bending your knees and hips, and coiling up and rotating to get into the position of a back swing in order to execute a forward swing."

This stop-start element of tennis is good for your body. "The duration of a typical tennis movement is between four to 10 seconds," Kellett says. "You then have around 20 seconds' recovery between each movement or match. "This type of movement lends itself to interval-style training, which, research has shown, is a great way to improve your fitness levels and burn calories."

A good level of fitness is an important component of tennis, mainly because of the constant acceleration and deceleration required. "Your body needs to go from zero to 100 in a matter of seconds," Morris says. "It's a much more physical game than it used to be. It involves spring work, a combination of anaerobic and aerobic exercise as you move from the baseline to the net, and you need endurance to last the distance as well."

The more you play the stronger, leaner and fitter you become. "When you land, either after leaping to hit a ball or after serving, there's 2½ times your weight going through your body," Kellett says. This means your muscles need to absorb that impact. "As your body adapts to these forces, it becomes stronger and fitter over time. The stronger you get, the more likely you'll stay injury-free."

The importance of warming up

Most tennis players suffer from upper limb pain or overuse of elbow, shoulders and wrists. "You can help to prevent these by putting in place an appropriate strength program," Kellett says. This should include resistance and weight training.

Don't forget to maintain hydration. Sip water slowly between points, and if your game lasts longer than an hour, consider drinking electrolyte or energy drinks to replace salts.

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