

Is stretching really *THAT* important?

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Why should I stretch?

Stretching is a very important and often an overlooked part of any good fitness program. The main objective with stretching is to increase and maintain range of motion in all joints of the body. However, there are many benefits reaped when any individual begins a good stretching program. Some benefits include:

- Help prevent joint and ligament sprains as well as muscle and tendon strains.
- Help reduce muscle and joint stiffness.
- Improve body awareness.
- Improve blood circulation.
- Reduce muscle cramping and spasms.
- Help reduce advanced degeneration at many joints.
- Improve relaxation.
- Reduce muscle soreness after other exercise or hard work.

How Should I stretch?

Stretching should always be performed without pain. A gentle pull should be felt, and sustained without bouncing or straining for thirty seconds. Many studies have been published on the ideal time stretching should be held, but for the sake of simplification and my clinical experience thirty seconds is sufficient. Other types of stretching can be performed with a partner, but are more in-depth and put one at more risk for injury if performed improperly. Talk to your physician or a physical therapist with specific questions.

Ideally, stretching is performed after an adequate warm-up. This warm-up functions to increase the muscle temperature and blood flow, therefore allowing better tolerance and results with the stretching routine. The warm-up period should be sufficient to warm up the muscles to be stretched. Time requirements include a minimum of 5-10 minutes of light aerobic activity utilizing large muscle groups. Walking, biking or other light calisthenics can be utilized as appropriate to your needs.

Stretching immediately after exercise or competition can be very beneficial for improving flexibility. The key thing to understand is that consistency is the key when stretching. Generally speaking, one will not improve their flexibility by the quick 1-2 minutes of stretching before an event. Flexibility will improve and the effects will be reaped by the days and weeks of stretching before the event. In other words, benefits are not gained by stretching before activity on any one day...benefits are gained by the accumulation of improvement in flexibility gained prior to the given day.

Who, What and When?

Stretching will benefit anyone including high-level athletes, weekend warriors, couch potatoes, laborers, office workers, and the elderly. The majority of injuries I see in my practice are preventable, usually the result of repetitive stress or trauma that could have been avoided with proper muscle balance.

All muscle groups should be stretched equally across each joint. Generally, the large muscle groups should be included in all flexibility routines, and smaller groups added based on job, activity or sport-specific need.

As alluded to earlier, stretching on a consistent basis and after a warm-up is the key for optimal results. The time of day is not as important. My advice is to stretch at a time of day that you can commit to consistently, as it is more important to actually perform the exercise versus any specific time of the day.

The Bottom Line

Maintaining flexibility throughout one's life will make a difference in every day activities. It is great to start young with proper supervision, but it is never too late to improve flexibility. Joint range of motion that is not consistently used will become tight and essentially "lost". When one loses part of the range of motion in a joint, the accessible portion tends to be over utilized and causes degeneration in the joint faster than would have occurred if more of the joint range is used with daily activities. As with any exercise program, talk with your physician before starting, and talk to a qualified physician or physical therapist about any specific questions on how to begin.

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