



Stretching: Focus on flexibility

You can stretch anytime, anywhere. Just follow these tips to do it safely and effectively.

You know exercise is important, but what about stretching? Does stretching take a back seat to your exercise routine? Not so fast.

Stretching may help you:

- Improve your joint range of motion
- Improve your athletic performance
- Decrease your risk of injury
- Understand why stretching can help and how to stretch correctly.

Benefits of stretching

Studies about the benefits of stretching have had mixed results. Some research shows that stretching doesn't reduce muscle soreness after exercise, and other studies show that lengthening the muscle and holding the stretch immediately before a sprint may slightly worsen performance.

However, research has shown that stretching can help improve flexibility, and, consequently, the range of motion of your joints.

Better flexibility may:

- Improve your performance in physical activities
 - Decrease your risk of injuries
 - Help your joints move through their full range of motion
 - Enable your muscles to work most effectively
- Stretching also increases blood flow to the muscle. You may learn to enjoy the ritual of stretching before or after hitting the trail, ballet floor or soccer field.

Stretching essentials

Before you plunge into stretching, make sure you do it safely and effectively. While you can stretch anytime, anywhere, proper technique is key. Stretching incorrectly can actually do more harm than good.



Use these tips to keep stretching safe:

Don't consider stretching a warmup. You may hurt yourself if you stretch cold muscles. Before stretching, warm up with light walking, jogging or biking at low intensity for five to 10 minutes. Even better, stretch after your workout when your muscles are warm.

Consider skipping stretching before an intense activity, such as sprinting or track and field activities. Some research suggests that pre-event stretching may actually decrease performance. Research has also shown that stretching immediately before an event weakens hamstring strength.

Also, try performing a "dynamic warmup." A dynamic warmup involves performing movements similar to those in your sport or physical activity at a low level, then gradually increasing the speed and intensity as you warm up.

Strive for symmetry. Everyone's genetics for flexibility are a bit different. Rather than striving for the flexibility of a dancer or gymnast, focus on having equal flexibility side to side (especially if you have a history of a previous injury). Flexibility that is not equal on both sides may be a risk factor for injury.

Focus on major muscle groups. Concentrate your stretches on major muscle groups such as your calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck and shoulders. Make sure that you stretch both sides.
Also stretch muscles and joints that you routinely use.

Don't bounce. Stretch in a smooth movement, without bouncing. Bouncing as you stretch can injure your muscle and actually contribute to muscle tightness.

Hold your stretch. Breathe normally and hold each stretch for about 30 seconds; in problem areas, you may need to hold for around 60 seconds.

Don't aim for pain. Expect to feel tension while you're stretching, not pain. If it hurts, you've pushed too far. Back off to the point where you don't feel any pain, then hold the stretch.

Make stretches sport specific. Some evidence suggests that it's helpful to do stretches involving the muscles used most in your sport or activity. If you play soccer, for instance, stretch your hamstrings as you're more vulnerable to hamstring strains.

Keep up with your stretching. Stretching can be time-consuming. But you can achieve the most benefits by stretching regularly, at least two to three times a week.

Skipping regular stretching means you risk losing the potential benefits. For instance, if stretching helped you increase your range of motion, your range of motion may decrease again if you stop stretching.

Bring movement into your stretching. Gentle movements, such as those in tai chi or yoga, can help you be more flexible in specific movements. These types of exercises can also help reduce falls in older adults.

Remember the "dynamic warmup": If you're going to perform a specific activity, such as a kick in martial arts or kicking a soccer ball, start out slowly and at low intensity to get your muscles used to it. Then speed up gradually.

Know when to exercise caution

If you have a chronic condition or an injury, you might need to adjust your stretching techniques. For example, if you already have a strained muscle, stretching it may cause further harm. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about the most appropriate way to stretch if you have any health concerns.

Also remember that stretching doesn't mean you can't get injured. Stretching, for instance, won't prevent an overuse injury.