

Stretching: Focus on Flexibility

Stretching prepares your muscles for exercise. And when you include stretching as part of your overall exercise, it can boost your flexibility, balance and coordination.

You pound out mile after mile on the treadmill. You grunt and groan your way through a series of weightlifting exercises. You even add some time on the stationary bike for good measure. And you smile with satisfaction that you made it through your workout. Nothing to do now but hit the shower.

Not so fast. Did you take time to stretch out those muscles that pulled you through your invigorating workout? Most aerobic and strength training programs inherently cause your muscles to contract and flex. For equal balance, pay attention to lengthening, or stretching, those muscles after your workout.

Benefits of Stretching

Add regular stretching to your fitness goals to experience these benefits:

- **Increased flexibility and better range of motion of your joints.** Flexible muscles can improve your daily performance. Tasks such as lifting packages, bending to tie your shoes or hurrying to catch a bus become easier and less tiring. Flexibility tends to diminish as you get older, but you can regain and maintain it.
- **Improved circulation.** Stretching increases blood flow to your muscles. Blood flowing to your muscles brings nourishment and gets rid of waste byproducts in the muscle tissue. Improved circulation can help shorten your recovery time if you've had any muscle injuries
- **Better posture.** Frequent stretching can help keep your muscles from getting tight, allowing you to maintain proper posture. Good posture can minimize discomfort and keep aches and pains at a minimum
- **Stress relief.** Stretching relaxes tight, tense muscles that often accompany stress.
- **Enhanced coordination.** Maintaining the full range of motion through your joints keeps you in better balance. Coordination and balance will help keep you mobile and less prone to injury from falls, especially as you get older.

Many experts believe that stretching may also reduce your risk of injury in sports. "The more prepared your muscles and joints are for an activity, the more protected you are against injury," says Edward Laskowski, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist and co-director of the Sports Medicine Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

Dr. Laskowski explains, "If your joints are not able to go through their full range of motion because of muscle tightness, sports and exercise activities may put an excessive load on the tissue and contribute to injury. Think of a runner with tight calf muscles and a tight Achilles tendon running up a hill. This activity requires that the ankle bend up to accommodate the slope of the hill. But if it can't because of tightness, the runner may be at risk of getting Achilles tendon irritation and injury over a period of

Stretching essentials

Basic stretches to improve your flexibility focus on your body's major muscle groups: calf, thigh, hip, lower back, neck and shoulder

- **Warm up first.** Stretching muscles when they're cold increases your risk of pulled muscles. Warm up by walking while gently pumping your arms, or do a favorite exercise at low intensity for five minutes.
- **Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds.** It takes time to lengthen tissues safely. Hold your stretches for at least 30 seconds — and up to 60 seconds for a really tight muscle or problem area. That can seem like a long time, so wear a watch or keep an eye on the clock to make sure you're holding your stretches long enough. For most of your muscle groups, if you hold the stretches for at least 30 seconds, you'll need to do each stretch only once.
- **Don't bounce.** Bouncing as you stretch can cause small tears (microtears) in the muscle, which leave scar tissue as the muscle heals. The scar tissue tightens the muscle even further, making you even less flexible — and more prone to pain.
- **Focus on a pain-free stretch.** If you feel pain as you stretch, you've gone too far. Back off to the point where you don't feel any pain, then hold the stretch.

- **Relax and breathe freely.** Don't hold your breath while you're stretching.
- **Stretch both sides.** Make sure your joint range of motion is as equal as possible on each side of your body.
- **Stretch before and after.** Light stretching after your warm-up followed by a more thorough stretching regimen after your workout is your best bet.

In addition to stretching major muscle groups, stretch muscles and joints that you routinely use at work or play. Sport-specific stretching prepares your muscles for a particular sport or activity. For example, if you frequently play tennis or golf, working in a few extra shoulder stretches loosens the muscles around your shoulder joint, making it feel less tight and more ready for action.

Stretch when you exercise or three times a week to maintain flexibility

"Stretch as often as you exercise," Dr. Laskowski recommends. "Most experts recommend a cool-down period anyway after exercise. Going into your stretches after your workout is a good way to cool down.

"If you only have time to stretch once during your workout, do it afterward," Dr. Laskowski advises. "It's best to stretch after exercise, when your muscles are warm and more receptive to stretching."

Warm up a little more slowly if you plan to stretch only after your workout. And increase the intensity of the activity more slowly than you would if you had stretched your muscles before exercising. For example, if you go for a bike ride or a walk, start off slowly before increasing your pace. When you're finished and your muscles are warm, you can do your stretches.

If you're not a regular exerciser, you can still benefit from a regular stretching routine. Try to stretch at least three times a week to maintain flexibility.

If you exercise routinely but have a problem area, such as tightness in the back of your leg (hamstring), you might want to stretch every day or even twice a day.

Stretching may not be advised if you have certain types of injuries. For example, don't stretch strained muscles unless under a therapist's direction — you could cause further harm. If you have an injury or have a chronic condition, you may need to alter your approach to stretching. Talk with your doctor or a physical therapist.

No gym required

Stretching is something you can easily do anytime, anywhere — in your home, your office, or even when you're traveling. Aim to stretch at least three times a week. If you can't get a full workout in, you can still benefit from stretching at least that often.