[IMAGE]

You’ve Got to be Flexible

By Editorial Staff

Flexibility is the ability to move the joints and muscles through a normal range of motion, and it’s an important fitness measure; in fact, it’s one of the five health-related components of physical fitness, along with muscular strength, muscle endurance, cardiorespiratory endurance and body composition. We lose flexibility as we age, which means we need to develop it while we’re young and then maintain it when we’re older.

The Why

Here are just a few of the health benefits attributable to a regular flexibility and stretching program:

- *Increased circulation:* Stretching increases blood flow to muscles, nourishing them and eliminating waste products. It also helps shorten recovery time following a muscle injury.
- *Improved posture:* Stretching helps keep muscles loose, which allows you to maintain proper posture. Better posture means less discomfort caused by poor posture-related conditions such as back pain.
- *Better coordination:* Flexibility improves range of motion, which maximizes balance, coordination and mobility. This is especially important to minimize the risk of falls as we age.
- *Stress relief:* Because flexible muscles are loose muscles, they’re less prone to tighten up during periods of excess stress and tension.

The How

- Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark OK, now you know why flexibility is so important. Let’s talk about how to make stretching/flexibility a part of your weekly routine. According to the Mayo Clinic, there are six essential guidelines to keep in mind when stretching:

1. **Warm up first.** You’re more likely to pull a muscle when it’s cold. Start off with five minutes of walking, light limb movement or a favorite low-intensity exercise.
2. **Hold each stretch for 30-60 seconds, remembering to breathe.** Simply put, it takes time to stretch tissues safely. Go too fast and you could be in for trouble in the form of a muscle tear. For most muscle

groups, a single 30-60-second stretch is adequate.

3. **Don’t bounce.** Speaking of muscle tears, bouncing during a stretch can cause microtears in the muscle, leaving scar tissue as the muscle heals, which will only make the muscle tighter and more prone to future pain and inflexibility.
4. **Avoid pain.** You shouldn’t feel pain during a stretch. If you do, you’ve gone too far and need to back off and hold the stretch in a pain-free position.
5. **Stretch both sides.** Joint range of motion needs to be as equal as possible on both sides of the body; after all, if only half the body is flexible, the other half can still cause problems.
6. **Stretch before and after exercise.** Stretch them lightly before a workout and then more thoroughly after your workout. Stretching before activity improves flexibility and reduces injury risk; stretching after exercise relaxes tired muscles and reduces muscle soreness and stiffness.

Simple Stretches

With the why and how in your memory bank, all you need now is a few minutes a day at least three days a week, or every time you exercise, to get flexible and stay flexible. Here are a five simple stretches (again courtesy of the Mayo Clinic) you can start doing right away:

Neck Stretch

Bend your head forward and slightly to the right to stretch the left side of your neck. With your right hand, gently pull your head downward, stretching the back left side of your neck. Hold for 30-60 seconds and repeat on the opposite side.

The Shoulder Stretch

Bring your left arm across the body and hold it with your right arm above or below the elbow. Hold for 30-60 seconds, switch arms and repeat. To stretch the internal rotators of the shoulder (important if you participate in tennis, golf or other overhead/throwing/swinging sports), hold a rolled-up towel vertically with both hands. One hand should hold the top of the towel and the other hand should hold the bottom of the towel. Now gently pull the towel toward the ceiling with your top hand, stretching the shoulder on your opposite arm. Hold for 30-60 seconds, switch top hand and repeat.

- Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **The Calf Stretch**

Stand at arm’s length from a wall or any otherwise sturdy structure. Put your right foot behind your left foot and slowly bend your left leg forward, keeping the right knee straight and the right heel on the ground. Keep your back straight and your hips and feet facing forward. Hold for 30-60 seconds, and then switch legs and repeat.

The Hamstring Stretch

Lie on the floor near the outer corner of a wall or door frame. With your left heel resting against the wall and your left knee bent slightly, straighten your left leg until you feel a stretch along the back of your left thigh. Hold the stretch for 30 to 60 seconds, switch legs and repeat.

The Knee-to-Chest Stretch

Lie on your back on a firm surface. Your knees and hips should be bent, and the backs of your heels should stay flat on the floor. Slowly pull one knee to your chest until you feel a stretch in your lower back. Keep the opposite leg relaxed in a comfortable position, with your knee bent or the leg extended. Bring the knee as close to the chest as possible without experiencing discomfort, hold for 30-60 seconds and repeat with the opposite leg.

- Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark *Note:* The Mayo Clinic recommends osteoporosis patients avoid the knee-to-chest stretch to prevent possible compression fractures of the vertebrae.

And there you have it: why flexibility matters and what you can do to make sure you’re as flexible as possible. If you have any questions regarding how to do a particular stretch or if you believe an existing health condition could limit you from safely performing a flexibility routine, talk to your doctor first.