

[IMAGE]

Stretch Your Limits

By Editorial Staff

If you're not a regular stretcher, you might end up on one someday. We're totally serious. Without adequate stretching, your body is much more likely to end up stiff and inflexible, particularly over time. That means you're more likely to be limited in your range of motion, and going outside of that range of motion could do damage. Here's why stretching should be a regular part of your daily wellness routine, and the best stretches to get you started.

Stretching Fundamentals

Let's consider a rubber band and a string of equal lengths. The rubber band is fairly flexible by nature, so it can stretch (within reason) to accommodate what you need it to accommodate (for example, a stack of paper). The same length of string, on the other hand, doesn't have much flexibility, if any, so if it's extended beyond its length, what happens? If it's stretched even slightly, it may start to fray; stretch it further and it will likely break (tear) into two or more pieces entirely. Bad news if that's your hamstring.

Many people exercise, but far fewer stretch. Perhaps it's because while exercise generally has visible benefits – you look better – stretching doesn't appear to do much for you on a day-to-day basis unless you're a gymnast, yoga instructor, rock climber or someone else who relies on flexibility. But that doesn't mean stretching isn't important. On the contrary; whether you're a professional athlete or a homemaker, proper stretching can help prevent injury and let you live your life to the fullest.

Benefits of Stretching

lady stretching - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Stretching is important for several reasons. It improves flexibility, which can come in handy whether you're reaching down to pick up a pencil from the floor, climbing a ladder to the roof or trying to grab your overeager child before they run into the street. From a sports perspective, flexibility allows you to move more easily and with a greater range of motion while reducing the odds that you'll pull, strain or overstretch something in the heat of battle. It also can protect against long-term injury, in the sense that flexibility and range-of-motion deficits can cause overcompensation patterns to develop. For example, if your hamstrings and calf muscles lack adequate

range of motion, it may affect lower leg and foot mechanics, leading to tendinitis or other issues over time.

Because stretching makes your body more flexible, it also has mental health benefits. First, picture yourself on the couch after a long day's work or a morning at the racquetball court, sore, stiff and in pain. Now picture yourself on the same couch after the same activities, but well-stretched, blood and oxygen circulating properly, able to achieve a superior range of motion despite your draining day. Now that's a reason to stretch, isn't it?

Which Stretch Is Best?

Traditionally, stretching routines have followed the principle of static holding; that means holding a stretch in a single position for 20-30 seconds or more. These types of stretches, known as *static* stretches, were the only stretches in town for years. Of late, experts in the fitness world increasingly question whether static stretching, particularly *before* running or performing a sport, has value. In fact, they theorize that static stretching may actually increase injury risk if performed before participating in an activity.

The reason for this concern is because when your muscles are cold, they're at their most stiff. That makes perfect sense, right? Again, picture yourself heading out for a run – without warming up your body – after spending a sedentary day at your desk at work and another hour in your car coming home. Static stretching could actually overstretch the muscle, straining or tearing it.

The solution, according to more and more experts, is to warm up first, complete your physical activity (say, a run) and *then* perform static stretches, when your body can handle it. The bottom line is that cold muscles are much easier to injure than warm muscles; applying a prolonged, static stretch before you're adequately warmed up could do more damage than good.

So, does that mean you shouldn't stretch *before* an activity? Of course not. But you might not want to do static stretches. Instead, try dynamic active stretches – things like knee lifts, arm circles, walking lunges, leg swings, torso twists, etc. Think of dynamic stretches as a way to warm up your body in a gentle fashion that prepares you for your activity. Rather than holding a single area of the body in a stretched position for 30 seconds or more, you're stretching multiple muscles and muscle groups by way of continuous movement.

The best way to view static versus dynamic stretching is in terms of motion: When performing a static stretch, you're essentially holding a stretch in one position for a certain length of time, stretching one particular muscle or muscle group (e.g., the calf). When performing a dynamic (active) stretch, you're still

stretching the calf muscle(s), but only for a few seconds at a time, and you're not really "holding" it in one place. And doing lunges, for example, doesn't just stretch the calf muscles, but also the lower leg, upper leg, hips, glutes and lower back.

Stretch Your Limits

Is a consistent stretching routine missing from your life? If it is, you're putting your health at risk.

Remember, stretching isn't just for athletes; it's for everyone - that means you! Talk to your doctor about the benefits of stretching and how to properly perform static and dynamic stretches to maximize flexibility and reduce injury risk for a lifetime.

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