

[IMAGE]

A Stretch Goes a Long Way

By Chelsea Cooper, MPA, CPT

As we age, our muscles tighten and range of motion in our joints decreases. This can impact even the most active lifestyle and hinder your normal day-to-day activities. Tasks that used to be simple, like zipping up a dress or reaching for a can off the top shelf, may become extremely difficult. A regular stretching program can help lengthen your muscles and make daily activities routine again.

The word flexible comes from the Latin word flexus, which means "to bend." Flexibility is the degree to which an individual muscle will lengthen. Stretching increases flexibility, which will help you perform daily activities and reduce the risk of muscle, joint and tendon injuries. Stretching also improves circulation, increasing blood flow to the muscles. Increased blood flow provides more nourishment to the muscles and gets rid of more waste by-products in the muscle tissue itself. Improved circulation can also help speed up recovery time if you suffer a muscle injury.

What's more, stretching can help eliminate or decrease low back pain, one of the most common kinds of structural pain, affecting a large percentage of the population. Muscle tightness in the quadriceps, hamstrings, hip flexors, and low back muscles is a common cause of low back pain. Stretching these muscles will often eliminate the pain. Keep in mind that every joint is tied to another joint, so if one muscle is tight, it is going to affect another joint or muscle.

One of the greatest benefits of stretching is that you're able to increase your range of motion, which means your joints can move further before an injury occurs. Stretching after you exercise (at least after you've warmed up a bit) has proven to be much more effective than pre-workout stretches, because by the time you've completed your workout, the muscles are "warm." Post-exercise stretching also helps reduce soreness, improves workout recovery, and ensures muscle and tendons are working properly.

There are no disadvantages to stretching - unless, of course, you do them improperly, which is actually easy to do if you don't know what you're doing. Here are a few tips to keep in mind before starting any stretching program:

DON'T bounce when stretching; hold your position for the specified time.

DON'T stretch cold muscles; always do some type of warm-up for at least five minutes: jogging in place, walking on a treadmill, light jump rope, etc.

DON'T overstretch. There should be a little discomfort, especially if you're not used to stretching, but it should not be painful.

DON'T stretch a muscle improperly. If you are not sure of the proper stretch or how to perform it, get some assistance from a professional.

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