

Try Some Stretches

Four Ways to Flex Our Muscles

by Marlaina Donato

Whether working out at the gym or taking to the trails, stretching is sometimes an overlooked asset to any exercise regimen. Eliminating stretches or not doing them properly increases the risk of injury and deprives muscles of what they need for optimum performance.

“Just because you are in shape doesn’t always mean you have good flexibility,” notes LaReine Chabut, a Los Angeles fitness expert and author of *Stretching for Dummies*. “If you do plenty of strength training and cardio, but you don’t do any stretching, you’re creating an imbalance in your body. Flexibility plays a big part in overall fitness.”

Loosening up correctly not only fosters flexibility, but also improves muscle endurance and coordination. “Everyone should be stretching, especially as you age, to maintain range of motion and balance,” advises fitness trainer Ben Wegman, of The Fitting Room, in New York City. “A personal workout regime can be enhanced with stretching, which also increases mobility, improves posture and performance, and reduces stress levels.”

Four Categories, Many Variations

“Different types of stretches access different muscles and different types of flexibility, but together, can benefit everyone,” says Wegman. There are many ways to stretch, but knowing what to do and when to do it can be key to optimum results and injury prevention.

Warming up to different types of stretches can be a little daunting, but the basic four (sometimes combined in terminology) are passive, static, active and dynamic. In the past, ballistic stretching was common and included potentially harmful bouncing techniques,

but today dynamic stretching has become a favorite among trainers, consisting of specific, controlled movements that prepare the body for the demands of both engaging in sports and an average workout.

“Stretches can be confusing, so as a rule of thumb, I suggest dynamic stretching for any workout that involves movement and passive stretching for cooling down after a workout to release the muscles,” says Chabut.

Stretching also plays an important role in yoga, which generally complements different stretches by adding a mind-body connection. “Breath is the key difference between yoga and regular stretching,” notes Chabut.

“The use of breath allows you to get deeper into the muscle. Yoga also places particular emphasis on core muscles: the abdominals, lower back and spinal muscles. Through focus and deep breathing, yoga allows you to move beyond stretching into a deeper physical experience that both strengthens and focuses your body.”

Injury Prevention and Recovery

Nancy Whelan, a physical therapist and owner of The Physical Therapy Center, in West Palm Beach, Florida, emphasizes the importance of proper technique for clients to avoid further injury, especially individuals that had a torn Achilles tendon. “Stretching is important when doing any exercise, and especially important following surgery or injury, because the body’s reaction to either one is to contract, which can cause secondary problems,” explains Whelan.

“I think the body has an intelligence we must listen to. We must acknowledge our limitations and the signals our body

sends us to let us know that something is harmful or painful,” she notes. “When you take responsibility to take care of your body, it will take care of you.”

For injury prevention, dynamic stretching offers many benefits. “It’s the best because it ensures that all major joints have full range of motion and sufficient muscle length,” says Wegman. She advises never to stretch an injured muscle or stretch too forcefully. “Introduce low-intensity stretching back into a regime only under a doctor’s supervision,” she cautions.

Daily Moderation



For Chabut, moderation is everything. “Gently warm up the body before moving into deeper stretches. Build heat in the muscles slowly to avoid potential injury,” she advises.

Proper stretching is beneficial, but not doing so can foster bad habits and cause muscle or tendon tears. “Stretching cold muscles or using improper techniques such as bouncing when holding a stretch position are common mistakes,” observes Whelan.

Stretching doesn’t have to be reserved for workouts, and with a little discipline, its

benefits can easily be attained at home or the office. “Take 10 minutes during your favorite TV program and perform a couple of stretches,” suggests Wegman. “Make it a point to get up every half-hour and stretch for five minutes before resuming work. If you aren’t being pushed or pushing yourself, you won’t see results or make improvements. If it doesn’t challenge you, it doesn’t change you.”

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

BOOKS

- *Dynamic Stretching: The Revolutionary New Warm-Up Method to Improve Power, Performance and Range of Motion*, by Mark Kovacs
- *Dynamic Stretching vs. Static Stretching and Their Benefits*, by Jack Cascio
- *Exercise Balls for Dummies* (including safe stretches for pregnant woman) and *Stretching for Dummies*, both by LeReine Chabut
- *Stretching: 20 Simple Stretching Techniques to Relieve Pain and Increase Flexibility*, by Neb Notliar

ONLINE VIDEOS

- BlackBeltWiki.com/stretching (range of stretches specific to martial arts styles and body parts)
- DoYogaWithMe.com/yoga-beginners (free yoga videos for all levels)
- ElderGym.com/elderly-flexibility (highly detailed instruction tailored to seniors)
- Essentrics.com/media.html (videos from the PBS series *Classical Stretch*)
- StretchCoach.com/resources/stretching-videos (instruction specific to sports and muscle groups)
- StudioSweatOnDemand.com/classes/feature/good-for-beginners (select stretching videos)

STRETCHING GUIDE AT A GLANCE

STATIC

What it is: Hold a stretch in a challenging, but not painful position, for 10 to 30 seconds until feeling discomfort; once this is felt, the muscle then releases and relaxes.

Benefit: Improves flexibility.

ACTIVE (aka Static Active)

What it is: Engage and contract the muscle group opposite the one being stretched to initiate the stretch; repeat. Many yoga poses are examples of active stretching.

Benefit: Increases flexibility in the muscles being stretched and increases strength in the opposing muscles.

PASSIVE

What it is: Employ an outside force such as a stretching device, strap or another’s body weight such as a trainer, physical therapist or massage therapist, which assists the stretch while the individual remains passive. The targeted muscles are not actively engaged. Examples include post-workout stretches applying pressure with a body part, towel or other prop or piece of equipment.

Benefit: Increases range of motion, decreases muscle tension (spasm) and reduces post-workout soreness and fatigue.

DYNAMIC

What it is: Use controlled, gradual movements and stretches that involve repeated range of motion moves, especially in relation to a specific activity or sport that will follow the warm-up.

Benefit: Prepares the body for activity and warms the muscles; especially advantageous after static stretches. Builds strength.

Primary sources: Fitness Science; Scott White, a power trainer in Scottsdale, AZ.