

The Benefits of Stretching

Most people are aware of the cardiovascular and strength training aspects of being physically active. However, stretching and flexibility exercises are often overlooked as an essential part of maintaining peak physical fitness. Stretching involves a series of slow and controlled movements that create tension to lengthen tendons, warm up ligaments and prepare the joints for being active. Without a good stretch routine, a regular exerciser would be missing out on many positive effects that exercise can have on the musculoskeletal system. These benefits include:

- Increased flexibility throughout the body
- Decreased joint stiffness and muscle tension
- Improved coordination and awareness of muscle range of motion during daily activities and sports, leading to decreased risk of injury

For maximal effectiveness, stretch when the body is warm, either after a workout or after a few minutes of low-intensity movement. After a workout, stretching expedites the removal of lactic acid and other metabolic waste products that contribute to soreness and stiffness. Taking the time to properly cool down and stretch also relieves pressure on joint cartilage and spinal discs, reducing inflammation and wear and tear on the joints. Reduced inflammation is an excellent benefit for people who want to exercise with arthritis, gout or Reiter's syndrome.

Done on its own, stretching can still improve health and well-being, independent of cardiovascular or resistance exercise routine. Just five to ten minutes of stretching in shower or during a break at work can improve enhance circulation and arterial compliance, reduce stress, and decrease blood pressure. Studies show that simply bending down to touch your toes and holding the position for 20 to 30 seconds a few times each day can improve peripheral blood flow to the legs, particularly in people with desk jobs. Back pain, shoulder stiffness and headaches also improve with a few minutes of stretching during a long day of repetitive, stationary work.

It takes only five to ten minutes per day to reap the benefits of stretching by increasing blood flow to your joints, ligaments, tendons and muscles. Here is a 5-minute series of stretches aimed at relieving tension in the head, neck, back and

legs. Hold each position for about 30 seconds on each side, inhaling and exhaling for a count of four four times.

Neck Turn – Stand or sit with chin and jaw parallel to the ground. Look over your right shoulder so that your face is at a 90 degree angle with your torso. Hold, breathe, then switch sides.

Neck Tilt with Arms Held Back – Lean right ear toward right shoulder while using your right hand to pull down on your left wrist behind your back. Keep the nose pointed forward and resist pointing the nose to the shoulder. Hold, breathe, then switch sides.

Standing Lateral Bend – With feet shoulder-width apart reach one hand over the head without bending forward or leaning back. Face the palm towards the floor to protect the shoulder joint and rest the other hand on the hip or bring it up to meet the raised hand without rotating the torso forward. Hold, breathe, then switch sides.

Toe Touch – Bend forward at the waist and try to have the head and neck parallel to the legs while fingers touch the toes. *Tip: Try stretching up raising both hands over the head and suck in your abdominal muscles before bending forward. Tight abs will help you round your back and get your head, neck and legs parallel.*

Chair lunge – Place one foot on the seat of a chair keeping the spine straight. Gently push the pelvis forward and feel the stretch in the hip flexors, which are constantly crunched by long periods of sitting.