



Stretching for Life

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Numerous studies prove that our bodies can fail us when we don't move them enough. In addition to issues such as heart disease and obesity, when we are not moving and stretching our bodies, our muscles can get tight, weaken and atrophy. It is important to work in cardiovascular and strength exercises. It is also key to stretch your muscles.

Why Do We Stretch?

Stretching has a multitude of benefits. When it is done properly and safely, it can improve flexibility and mobility. There is a reduced risk of injury when muscles are more flexible.



Stretching is important, especially if you are sitting for long stretches of time. If you are often in a sedentary state, the hip flexors and hamstrings can tighten, leading to joint issues, decreased stability and poor posture.

Posture can be compromised from frequent looking down at a desk, a book, a cellphone or needlework. If you add in stretching, it can improve posture and aid in healing related back pain.

If you safely work in stretches into your daily routine, you may be able increase range of motion and make daily living tasks easier, for instance, increasing the amount you can reach to place something on a high shelf. You do have to maintain good stretching practices in order to keep the flexibility gains you make.

Some data shows that stretching may improve circulation and blood flow to the muscles. This can shorten recovery time and may lessen muscle soreness.

Stretching can increase sports and daily activity performance. According to the American Council on Exercise (ACE), "When included as part of a well-rounded fitness routine, regular flexibility training, which includes dynamic stretching, can help enhance agility, power, speed and muscular strength."

Stretching can minimize the wear and tear on joints. With a regular stretch routine, our flexibility in muscles on each side of our joints are maintained so that they move in a balanced manner in all directions.

There is also a Zen factor. Gentle stretches can help release tension and alleviate stress. Participating in a yoga class is a great way to get a good stretch with the added benefit of peaceful stress reduction. There are even some chair yoga options available from Forever Fit (www.forever-fit.net) for participants that prefer not to do floor work.

Dynamic Stretches

To avoid injury, it is not recommended to begin exercise or static stretches without some sort of movement or warm up beforehand. If you engage in one of the Forever Fit (www.forever-fit.net) you will typically begin with a warm up and some dynamic movements to get your heart rate up and joints prepped for the main exercises. In particular, if you engage in Zumba® Gold classes, you will typically begin with step touch movements, some cardiovascular work and some toning work as part of a dynamic warmup.

Static Stretching

Static stretches are taken to the point of feeling tension in the muscle. You set your body part in the position for a stretch and hold it for between 15-60 seconds then repeat approximately 4 times, as recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM).

Holding a static stretch for too long can impair performance. A 2011 Behm and Chaouachi study found that when a single muscle group is static stretched more than 90 seconds (3 stretches of 30 seconds each) there is strong evidence for performance impairments immediately after. Shorter duration or less repetition of static stretches may be a more beneficial choice.

Assisted Stretching

Proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitated stretches (PNF), are an advanced form of flexibility training. The term proprioceptive refers to the ability to sense the position and location and orientation and movement of the body and its parts, and PNF involves the contraction and stretching of muscles with the help of another person. Developed in the 1940s to treat conditions including polio and multiple sclerosis, this technique requires the assistance of a trainer or other professional.

Guidelines and Cautions

There are contraindications to stretching, according to Kisner & Colby 2012. To prevent injury, extreme caution should be taken if you have an acute soft tissue injury, a healing fracture, joint hypermobility, infection, hematoma, pain, swelling, osteoporosis or arthritis, long term corticosteroid use, or restrictions from a medical professional.

It is a good idea to work with a trainer or other professional who can show you proper form and alignment for safely stretching each muscle group. Be sure to maintain normal breathing patterns and avoid holding the breath. You may experience a bit of discomfort as you stretch, but know when you have reached the point of pain and stop. Do not bounce in and out of a static stretch.

You'll notice that all fitness classes like those offered from Forever Fit (www.forever-fit.net) include a five to ten minute cooldown. This phase of a workout is primarily directed to prevent the tendency of blood to pool in the extremities, in turn avoiding the feeling of lightheadedness by gradually returning blood flow to the heart. This cool down phase also helps to remove metabolic waste from the muscles. Finally, a group workout will conclude with a stretching routine that can improve flexibility. This cooldown/stretch phase of a workout is one that some group exercise participants tend to want to skip, but it is critical for safety and success.



Kim Crowley works with Forever Fit (www.forever-fit.net) and has been teaching fitness with seniors since 2009. She is an ACE-certified Personal Trainer and an AFAA-certified Group Exercise Instructor. Kim has focused continuing education in exercise for people with Parkinson's Disease, including Parkinson's S.M.A.R.T. Training, Dance for PD, and Brian Grant Foundation Training. Kim is licensed to teach various Zumba® formats including Zumba® Gold. She works with a variety of clientele, ranging from youth to seniors with diverse needs including paraplegia, cancer, autism and dementia.

For more information or to schedule a professionally taught Forever Fit class at your site, call us at (860) 529-5110. www.forever-fit.net

