Loosen Up with a Regular Stretching Routine

Most people stretch every day, whether you realize it or not. You may bend your fingers back and forth when they get cramped after playing the piano. You might try to touch your toes to loose up the legs after a long car ride. Or you may twist side-to-side when your back starts to ache. All these motions are considered minor forms of stretching.

But doctors recommend regular stretching exercises to prevent aches and pains, not just to relieve them. A consistent stretching routine increases the flexibility of muscles and can prevent injuries. Stretching can also help you feel more comfortable when engaging in exercise or it can provide your body with necessary movement capabilities if you can't exercise.

The three main types of stretches are static, proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF) and ballistic. With static stretching, you should hold a pose in a slow, relaxed manner until the muscle feels loose. A static stretch should last between 15 and 60 seconds. However, to determine how far to stretch, you need to relax into the motion until you feel a mild amount of tension, and then hold the pose gently. Static stretching is applicable for people who want to relax, or if you're in the initial stages of rehabilitation after an injury or want to warm-up before exercising.

PNF stretches consist of contracting a muscle against resistance to create an isometric contraction. This movement creates tension, but no movement. The resistance can come from a stretching partner, a fitness band or other stretching accessories. PNF is considered a highly effective technique for enhancing flexibility.

Ballistic stretching consists of making small, rapid bouncing motions in the direction of the stretch. This technique is considered less effective than static and PNF stretching and puts muscle fibers at risk for injury because of the bouncing. It's also considered an advanced stretch that's applicable only for elite athletes or dancers.

When starting a stretching regimen, focus on upper and lower areas of the body. Remember to start slowly and never stretch beyond the point of pain. Here's where to place your focus.

• ***Lower back.*** Start by lying on the floor. Bend your right leg at the knee. Gently pull your right leg toward your chest with both hands.

If possible, keep the back of your head on the floor. Try to keep your lower back flat. Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat with the left leg.

• ***Hips and groin.*** Start by crouching close to the floor. Place your right leg forward, with the foot flat on the floor and the knee bent at a 90-degree angle. Extend your left leg behind you, with your knee on the floor. Without changing your position, lower the front of your hips downward. Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat with the left leg.

• ***Knees and calves.*** Start in a standing position. Hold your right foot with your left hand and gently pull your right heel toward your buttocks. Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat with the left leg.

• ***Shoulders.*** In a standing or sitting position, interlace your fingers. With your palms facing upward, push your arms slightly back and up. Hold for 15 seconds.

You can also use accessories during a stretching routine. Foam rollers and fitness balls can provide resistance or serve as an unstable platform for stretching, which also challenges balance. For example, you can start by lying on a foam roller that's placed vertically under your back. Keep one knee bent toward the ceiling with the foot on the floor. Raise the other leg toward the ceiling in a comfortable stretch while keeping your balance on the roller.

No matter what method you choose, try to stretch major muscle groups at least two or three days a week for maximum benefits.

Information adapted from the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, accessed at http://orthoinfo.aaos.org, and WebMDHealth, accessed at http://mywebmed.com

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