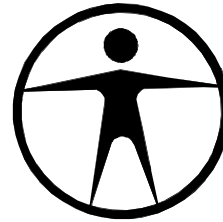


# Why S-t-r-e-t-c-h ?



- Reduce pain
- Improve circulation
- Enhance your well-being!

## Why Stretch?

Stretching is one of the best ways to stay in good physical and emotional shape. The flexibility that comes from daily stretching not only makes you more limber, but it assists in muscle recovery and reduces stress. A daily stretching routine can make a tremendous improvement in your body in both the short and long term.

If you are truly interested in reducing or eliminating pain in your muscles, you need to take an active role in your care. Medical research has shown that a good deal of ill health is related to lack of physical activity. The only way to prevent diseases of inactivity is make a lifetime commitment to movement – starting today. The body has an amazing ability to recover quickly, and stretching is an important link between the sedentary life and the active life.

Recent medical studies have also shown that 80% of the U.S. adult population will suffer lower back pain sometime in their life. The reasons for it aren't structural problems such as a slipped or herniated disk, but rather either tight hamstrings, tight hip flexors and/or weak abdominal muscles.

Even if you are active, your body will dehydrate and stiffen with age. By the time you become an adult, your tissues have lost about 15% of their moisture content, becoming less supple and more prone to injury. Your muscle fibers have begun to adhere to each other, developing cellular cross-links that prevent parallel muscle fibers from moving independently. Slowly our elastic fibers get bound up with collagenous connective tissue (fascia) and become more and more unyielding. Stretching slows the process of dehydration by increasing circulation and stimulating production of tissue lubricants. It pulls the interwoven cellular cross-links apart and helps muscles rebuild with healthy parallel cellular structure.

Stretching is extremely important to the amateur and professional athlete. Stretching before and after a workout will keep you flexible, prevent common injuries, and allow you to perform to the best of your ability.

Everyone can learn to stretch, regardless of age or flexibility. You do NOT need to be in top physical condition or to be an athlete. Whether you sit at a desk all day, dig ditches, do housework, stand in an assembly line, drive a truck or exercise regularly, THE SAME TECHNIQUES OF STRETCHING APPLY. No matter how inflexible you are today, you can become more limber over a period of time if you keep stretching consistently and correctly.

*Please note: If you have had recent physical problems or surgery, particularly of your joints or muscles, for if you have had an inactive or sedentary lifestyle for some time, please consult your physician before you start a stretching or exercise program. This is important!*

## How Can I Benefit From Daily Stretching?

The goal of stretching is to reduce muscle tension and promote more free movement of your muscles. But stretching is beneficial to even the most sedentary among us. Stretching is a critical aspect of healing and recovery of damaged or strained muscle tissue. It allows you to get a much clearer sense of your body. It is invigorating, helping to bring fresh blood and oxygen to your tissues.

Here's how you can benefit from stretching:

- Reduce muscle tension.
- Increase body relaxation.
- Improve coordination through freer and easier movement.
- Increase range of motion.
- Promote circulation.
- Prevent muscle strains and injuries.
- Ease intensity of strenuous activities such as sports or lifting weights in everyday tasks like shoveling and gardening because it prepares you for activity (it's a way of signaling the muscles that they are about to be used.)
- Increase body awareness. As you stretch various parts of the body, you focus on them and get in touch with them. You get to know yourself.
- Help loosen the mind's control of the body so that the body moves freely.
- It feels good!

## When Do I Stretch?

For stretching to be effective, it must be done regularly. It has often been said that a habit is built in 21 days. Make a commitment to stretch every day for 21 days in a row.

You can stretch:

- At work
- In the shower
- In your car
- Waiting for a bus
- Walking down the street
- Under a tree after a hike
- In your kitchen
- In bed!

Here's when you can work in your daily stretch:

- At home, before you start your day.
- To release tension and stress at work.
- After sitting or standing a long time.
- When you're feeling stiff.
- When you're watching TV, reading, listening to music, or sitting and talking.

## What Type of Stretches Are Appropriate For Me?

Stretching feels good when it is done correctly. Stretching should be tailored to your particular muscle structure, flexibility and varying tension levels. Eventually, you will want to follow a daily stretch routine that addresses every part of your body. Initially, you may have a specific area of chronic tension which will be the focus of your efforts. Your massage or other health professional can recommend an appropriate series of stretches to meet your needs.

There is a right way and a wrong way to stretch. The right way is a relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the muscles being stretched. The wrong way is to bounce up and down or to stretch to the point of pain – these methods will actually do more harm than good.

## Six Secrets of Stretching

1. Warm up before stretching. Raise your body temperature – walk/jog in place for a 1-3 min.
2. Exhale as you move into the stretch. Your muscle can then relax to its maximum length.
3. Stretch to the point of initial tension. Do NOT overstretch or stretch to the point of pain...ever! (See *Easy Stretch* and *Developmental Stretch* sections.)
4. Do not bounce to gain flexibility.
5. Be precise when moving into position – use concentration and control.
6. Move smoothly, leisurely and BREATHE.

## The “Easy Stretch”

The *easy stretch* reduces muscular tightness and tension and readies the tissue for the developmental stretch. When you begin to stretch, spend 10-15 seconds in the *easy stretch*. No bouncing! Go to the point where you feel a *mild* tension and relax as you hold the stretch. The feeling of tension should subside as you hold the position. If it doesn't, ease off slightly and find a degree of tension that is comfortable.

## The “Developmental Stretch”

After the easy stretch, move slowly into the *developmental stretch*. The developmental stretch fine-tunes the muscles and increases flexibility. Again, no bouncing. Move a fraction of an inch further until you again feel a mild tension and hold for 10-15 seconds. Be in control. Again, the tension should diminish. If not, ease off slightly. Note: if the stretch tension increases as the stretch is held and/or it becomes painful, you are stretching too far.

## Breathing

Your breathing should be slow, rhythmical, and under control. If you are bending forward to do a stretch, exhale as you bend forward and then breathe slowly as you hold the stretch. Do not hold your breath while stretching. If a stretch position inhibits your natural breathing pattern, then you are obviously not relaxed. Just ease up on the stretch so you can breathe naturally.

## The “Stretch Reflex”

Your muscles are protected by a mechanism called the *stretch reflex*. Any time you stretch the muscle fibers too far (either by bouncing or over stretching), a nerve reflex responds by sending a signal to the muscles to contract to avoid being injured. Pushing a stretch too far or bouncing up and down strains the muscles and activates the *stretch reflex*. This causes pain as well as physical damage due to the microscopic tearing of muscle fibers and fascia. This in turn leads to the formation of scar tissue in the muscles, with a gradual loss of elasticity. The muscles become stiff & sore and actually tighten the muscle you are trying to stretch.

**Sources:** “What Science Can Teach Us About Flexibility” – Fernando Pages Ruiz, [Yoga Journal](#), March/April 2000; *Stretching*. Bob Anderson, Shelter Publications, 2000; *Full Circle Fitness*. Rebecca Eastman, William Morrow & Company, 1990; “Stretching”, Health & Family section, [Chicago Tribune](#) . November 12, 2000.

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