

Nine Facts About Flexibility & Stretching

1. **Flexibility Matters.** Achieving and maintaining an adequate range of motion in your musculoskeletal joints is important for several reasons, including the fact that improving your level of flexibility will enhance your ability to perform certain physical and sports-related tasks. Flexibility exercises can also play a role in good back health - an insufficient level of flexibility in your hamstrings and lower-back muscles is thought to be a major factor in the incidence of lower back pain.
2. **Timing Matters.** As a general rule, the best time to stretch is after a brief warm-up. Warming up before stretching allows an increase of blood flow and raises the temperature in your muscles, both of which are vital for muscle elasticity. Stretching "cold" muscles may cause tearing or a sprain. You should also stretch after warming down after a workout.
3. **Prescription Matters.** One of the keys to maximizing the benefits of stretching is to perform two to six repetitions of each stretching exercise to the point of mild discomfort, holding each stretch for 10 to 30 seconds.
4. **Exercise Order Matters.** Begin your stretching routine by stretching the major muscle groups first (legs, torso, back).
5. **Isolation Matters.** Isolate the muscles the want to stretch. If other parts of your body move while you are performing a stretching exercise, the effectiveness of the stretch will be compromised and your risk of suffering an injury will increase.
6. **Technique Matters.** Three basic approaches to stretching are commonly used. *Ballistic stretching* (i.e., performing bouncing stretches – this technique is not recommended) involves momentum generated by the moving body part to produce the stretch. The second type of stretching is *static stretching* which involves gradually stretching through a muscle's full range of movement until a resistance is felt. The third common stretching technique is *contract-relaxing stretching* (i.e., proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation). This technique involves performing an isometric contraction of the muscle to be stretched, followed by slow, static stretching of that same muscle. ***Static stretching is considered to be the safest approach to flexibility exercises.***
7. **Pain Avoidance Matters.** You should not stretch to the point of it being painful. Any discomfort you experience while stretching should be relatively mild and brief.
8. **Gender Matters.** All factors considered, women tend to be significantly more flexible than men at all ages (youth to adulthood). To a degree, these differences can be overcome by men by engaging in properly designed stretching program for an extended period of time.
9. **Age Matters.** As you age, your level of flexibility tends to decrease, although such a decrease is often attributed to inactivity rather than the aging process.