

Flexibility is Essential to Good Health

Why Stretch?

Our level of health and fitness is determined by three factors: strength, cardiovascular fitness, and flexibility. While strength and cardiovascular fitness are extremely important, without at least some degree of flexibility, we would find it difficult and even painful to perform simple movements like getting up out of a chair, turning our heads, or lifting our arms. In fact, lack of flexibility is a primary risk factor for injury to soft tissues such as muscles, tendons and ligaments.

Stretching can help us maintain our flexibility, which has many benefits for both the body and mind. This isn't news. The importance of flexibility in maintaining overall health has been appreciated for thousands of years, as in the practice of Yoga. But you don't have to practice Yoga, be a gymnast, or compete in athletics to benefit from regular stretching. When you understand how the muscles work, it's easy to see that stretching is as important to your body as keeping oil in your car.

We all know a regular oil change can greatly extend the life and dependability our car; the same is true of our own flexibility. Consider regular stretching an opportunity to extend your warranty! A little routine maintenance can prevent catastrophic events! So before you take your flexibility for granted, let's look at the dangers of losing it.

FLEXIBILITY—We're Born with It

When a child falls, it seldom pulls a muscle; this is the body at its peak flexibility. Maintaining the ability to use the full range of motion around our joints should be a life-long effort. Flexibility depends primarily on the physical fitness of muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones that form our joints. For far too many of us, flexibility is just a memory. Chances are that if you could put your foot behind your head as a kid, you can't do it any more. Why? Sedentary lifestyles, reduced activity, chronic poor posture, and the unavoidable aging process conspire to leave us stiff, sore, and too often at risk for injury. We grunt and groan performing simple tasks that when we were more active we did without a thought. And the less we do, the less we can do!

Lifestyles and Aging

How do we lose our flexibility? To some degree, it's programmed into our genetic structure; however, lifestyle is a leading factor. Optimum at birth, flexibility declines in proportion to activity, (or the lack of it). We perform the same tasks in the same way, over-and-over, limiting ourselves to set movement patterns that don't push our muscles past their *comfort zone*. We put pressure on our back and joints by sitting or standing in the same positions all day, day-after-day.

It's inevitable; as we age, we lose flexibility and strength. If we don't regularly move our skeletal muscles, they can *forget* how to work. Without regular movement, they shorten, lose strength and elasticity, and raise the risk of injury.

BENEFITS OF STRETCHING

The good news is that performing a regular stretch routine can reverse the effects of sedentary lifestyles, poor postures, cumulative trauma, and even the natural aging process. Regular stretching can benefit us in as many ways as there are people and activities. A few of the benefits most often recognized by experts are given here. Once you begin your stretch routine, you will be able to add your own to the list.



- **Reduce stress.** Stretching relaxes muscles and relieves tension.
- **Increase physical performance.** A flexible joint requires less energy to move through its range of motion.
- **Decrease risk of injury.** Tight, inflexible muscles are prone to tearing.
- **Supply nutrients and expel waste.** Stretching improves fluid exchange to muscles.
- **Improves posture.** Better posture can relieve pain and fatigue, **AND...IT FEELS GOOD!**

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