

Flexibility

Flexible muscles and joints allow us to move freely without pain or restriction and support our body in activity. The more flexible we are, the less likely we are to become injured.

There are a number of factors that can limit joint mobility. These include genetics, joint structure, the strength of opposing muscle groups, and neuromuscular coordination. Flexibility training is important because it minimizes these limitations and helps maintain balance in muscle groups that are overused.

Types of Stretching

The best way to increase your flexibility is to stretch. The type of stretching that is most recommended by professionals is static stretching because it is associated with a low risk of injury.

Static Stretching involves a slow, gradual elongation of the muscle through a full range of motion. This is a low intensity, long duration technique. This is the recommended type of stretching.

Ballistic Stretching involves quick elongation of the muscle, almost a bouncing. This is a high intensity, short duration technique. This type of stretching is not recommended, however athletes or performers for specific reasons may employ this technique.



Principles of Stretching

These principles for stretching are recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). A helpful acronym to use to remember the principles of stretching is DR. FIT.

D is for Duration. How long should I hold the stretch? Each individual stretch should be held for at least 10 seconds, but not longer than 60. Most stretches are held for 10 - 30 seconds.

R is for Repetition. How many stretches of each muscle group should I do? The ACSM recommends stretching each muscle group three times.

F is for Frequency. How often should I stretch? It is recommended that stretching sessions be as frequent as 3 - 5 times per week. For best results, stretching daily is recommended.

I is for Intensity. How intense should the stretch be? No Pain, No Gain is not a good measure of intensity for stretching! Each stretch should be performed to a limit of "mild discomfort". You will feel the stretch, but it should not be painful.



T is for Type. What type of stretch should I use? Static stretching is recommended. This type involves slow, gradual stretches.

Warming Up and Cooling Down

Many professionals agree that stretching should be incorporated into your fitness program. It is important to stretch both before and after exercising.

Be sure to warm up for a few minutes. A warm-up prepares your body mentally and physically for exercise and reduces risk for injury. A warm-up increases circulation in a gradual manner in an effort to avoid undue pressure on the body. Jogging in place, riding a bike or walking for 5 minutes are good warm-up activities.



Stretching without a proper warm up can lead to pulled or strained muscles! Stretching before exercise eases tissue stiffness. Stretches should focus on those muscles that will be used during physical activity.

Stretching after exercise will enhance muscle relaxation, improve circulation to muscles, and expedite the removal of unwanted wastes. In addition, stretching later in the workout will contribute to a more permanent elongation of the muscle.

