

Do you dread stretching?

I don't know why, and I can't find any studies on this, but my impression is that most people do not stretch as much as they know they should. I certainly don't. It might be that many of the benefits of stretching take months to achieve or that it's not an exciting thing to do or talk about, but no matter the excuse the fact is that stretching is very important. This article hopes to provide some motivation to overcome the dread and get us all bending and stretching a bit more each day.

David Nolan, a physical therapist at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital and Kollins Ezekh a celebrity fitness coach both stress that regular stretching keeps muscles strong and flexible, increasing the range of motion in the joints. This allows you to do many things like getting in and out of chairs and up and down stairs and from the floor with ease or playing sports with less chance of injury. Stretching also improves blood circulation better distributing nutrients through the body and it improves posture. Another benefit is that stretching reduces stress and releases tension. Without stretching, muscles become short and tight putting you at risk for joint pain, strains and muscle damage. Nolan adds that "we all need to stretch in order to protect our mobility and independence. It should be done daily."

In a March 31, 2020 on-line article in ForbesLife titled "Why You Should Do Stretches Every Day", Ezekh states that "our joints can lose up to 50% of their range of motion as we age, so stretching is not just important for athletes hoping to prevent tears, sprains or strains; rather, we all need to be consistent with stretching during each stage in our lives." And the Victoria, Australia State Government Department of Health states that at least half of the age-related changes to muscles, bones and joints are caused by disuse.

If you are now thinking that maybe you would like to do some stretching, the next question is what kind of stretching, static or dynamic. From what I've read doing a bit of both might be good, but, the most beneficial stretch is whichever one you will do regularly. Static stretches are ones that you hold for at least 30 seconds, such as a seated hamstring stretch where you have your legs straight out in front of you and you bend forward and hold. A dynamic stretch involves repetitive motion such as front to back or side to side lunges or leg swings. These start with small movements and build – with a leg swing maybe building to touching your foot in the front with the opposite arm.

Nolan, in the September 15, 2019 issue of Harvard Health Publishing stated that you don't have to stretch every muscle. "The areas critical for mobility are in your lower extremities: your calves, your hamstrings, your hip flexors in the pelvis and quadriceps in the front of the thigh." Stretching your shoulders, neck, and lower back is also beneficial. Aim for a program of daily stretches or at least three or four times per week. He continues "It takes weeks to months to get flexible, and you'll have to continue working on it to maintain it."

The March 31, 2020 ForbesLife article provides a nice list of do's and don'ts for stretching. This is a useful link to review before getting started:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nomanazish/2020/03/31/why-you-should-do-stretches-every-day-and-the-right-way-to-do-it/?sh=3bed740a45b6>. A brief summary of some of the suggestions are to warm up with a little walking before stretching, do NOT bounce during static stretching, hold for 30 seconds, take deep breaths in through the nose and out the mouth during the stretch and do NOT go past the point of mild discomfort – there should be no strong pain. If you do feel pain, there may be an injury or damage in the tissue. Stop stretching that muscle and talk to your doctor.”

I will close with a challenge to the “I don't have time” argument for not stretching. In a September 2018 by Marlene Cemons in the Chicago Tribune, Michael Jonesco, an assistant clinical professor of sports medicine and internal medicine at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center is quoted as saying "Static stretching is simple, it can be done anytime with minimal effort. Do it while in the hot tub or shower. You can do it while sitting in your work chair. I put some music on or watch a television show while I stretch. I'm relaxed, I'm not rushed, and it gives my muscles a better chance to stretch out." Hope you are encouraged to give stretching a try.

Betsy Meyer is a member of the Healthy Adams County Physical Fitness Task Force.