

Stretching to new limits

It is astounding how many fitness enthusiasts do not stretch properly or for an adequate length of time before working out. Waking up in the morning most of us have a good stretch before we get out of bed. It is natural.

In order for our muscles to be flexible and have the range of motion they are meant to have, we need to stretch. Flexibility is a key fitness component, yet the most ignored. All professional athletes go through a series of stretches before and after their training or competition. Stretching increases their speed, agility, and range of movement and also decreases the risk of muscular injury.

There are two different ways to stretch:

1. Static stretch - The muscle is slowly pulled until tension is felt then held. Once the tension eases you can then pull the muscle further and repeat the stretch, thereby increasing the range of motion and your flexibility.
2. Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitator (PNF) - In this method you statically stretch the muscle, then maximally contract, then immediately stretching it into a greater stretch. This method was developed in physiotherapy and used for rehabilitation.

There are no significant advantages to using one method over the other. The important factor is to include stretching into your workout program. Some of the benefits of stretching include an improved range of motion and posture, a reduced risk of muscular injury, lowering physical and mental stress, and releasing muscle tension and soreness.

Included below are a series of stretches. It is recommended to stretch a minimum of three times per week. To perform a stretch properly, slowly bring the muscle into position and hold for 10 to 30 seconds without bouncing. Mild tension should be felt not a burning pain. Do not hold your breath and always stretch a muscle that is already warmed up.

Chest: Clasp your hands behind your back. Keep the chest elevated and pull the shoulder blades together. If you can, try to keep the arms straight and lift them upwards.

Back: Grab onto an immovable object with both hands. Bend your knees and round the back, tuck your chin into the chest and pull. It's like hugging a big beach ball!

Shoulders: Stand straight with your feet shoulder width apart, bring one arm across the body, shoulder height, palms facing the ceiling, without rotating the torso. Use the other arm to hook around the elbow and pull the arm into the chest.

Hamstrings (back of the thigh): Lie on the floor with one leg bent the other straight up, pull the straight leg in towards your body. Repeat on other leg.

Quadriceps (front of the thigh): In a standing position, bend your right knee and hold your foot with your right hand. Keep your legs close together and gently tilt the pelvis forward. Repeat on the other leg.

Triceps (back of the upper arm): Bring one arm behind your head. Use the other arm to hold onto the elbow and gently lift up and over toward the head. Keep the body upright and be careful of your neck. Repeat on the other arm.

Biceps (front of the upper arm): Fully extend both arms out to the side, shoulder height, palms facing forward and gently push back.

Lower back: Lying flat on your back, lift one leg perpendicular then without raising the shoulders off the floor, bring the leg slowly across the body. Repeat on the other side.

Lateral Stretch: Standing hips facing forward, bring the right arm above the head and slowly reach left. Repeat on the other side.

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