

Benefits and Limitations of Stretching

By Megan Dwyer

Flexibility is identified as the degree of range of motion about a joint. A safe stretching program will enhance your flexibility. Most of us have been told that we need to stretch at some point in our lives. Many of us likely would agree that it feels good when we stretch. Nevertheless, the benefits stretching (as well as flexibility) are sometimes misunderstood and/or misapplied. How much flexibility is needed? An individual should be flexible enough to meet the day-to-day requirements of his/her life efficiently and without undue discomfort.

The purpose of any type of stretching program, whether it be active-isolated, PNF, static, dynamic, or any other kind of stretching regimen, should be to “optimize joint mobility while maintaining joint stability.” What does this mean? A stretching routine should take you through the full range of motion of the joint. It should stretch the muscles involved in moving the joint. (Ligaments do not stretch, and for the most part, neither do tendons.) The routine should not compromise the structural integrity of these connective tissues. An example of dangerous stretching technique is a ballistic or bouncing stretch in an attempt to stretch further than the muscles will safely allow. (To illustrate, an Achilles tendon will snap after it has been pulled with enough force to pull it only 3% longer.)

Benefits of Stretching

The benefits of a safe stretching program include improved posture and muscle symmetry. For example, for many the shoulders gradually become slump forward as they age (this is often exaggerated by working many hours in a slumped position, such as sitting in front of a computer). By stretching the chest muscles and strengthening the back, a person will stand up taller and move more efficiently and comfortably.

A third benefit of stretching is to relieve muscle imbalances that can disrupt movements that should come freely and naturally, such as walking gait. For instance, if the muscles on one side of the pelvic girdle are less flexible than on the other side, a constant tilt or twist of the hips can occur. This imbalance can compound while walking. With each step, three to five times the weight of the body is applied to the feet. If this imbalance becomes chronic, it can cause flexibility imbalances and unnecessary pain in other areas of the body.

Limitations of Stretching

Stretching will not significantly increase muscular strength, because the resistance against which the muscles work during a flexibility workout is relatively low. It is also limited in its ability to increase cardiovascular efficiency, because heart and lung capacity are not sufficiently challenged. Thus, it is important to combine stretching with other types of exercise for best results.

Temperature, body core temperature of the body and ambient temperature, can limit the effectiveness of one's stretching program. Extremes in temperature – high or low – can restrict the pliability of the muscles, which restricts range of motion. Cold weather can cause core temperature to drop below levels necessary to allow the muscles to stretch effectively. A very humid and heated environment is also a problem because it dehydrates the body. In an attempt to cool the core and the vital organs, the blood vessels dilate and the body will try to get rid of the blood volume by sweating. As water is lost from the muscles in the body's attempt to cool itself, flexibility decreases.

Equipment is another overlooked factor. Some individuals may currently lack the required flexibility to perform some stretches, particularly movements performed on the floor or ground. In such cases, a well-designed stretch machine or a bench might be used until the individual is ready for more advanced movements.

Stretching is an important part of any individual's exercise program. Combined with other types of exercise, such as strength training and cardiovascular exercise, it can help improve fitness and overall well-being. Though it is often neglected or performed sporadically, the benefits stretching provides are good reasons to make it a regular part of any fitness regimen.

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