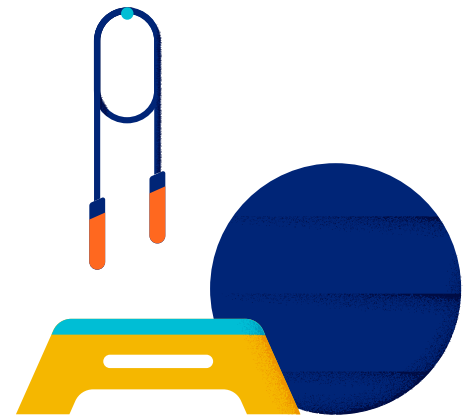


Health tip: Stretch for health



Flexibility is an important component of physical activity and should be incorporated into a daily physical fitness plan. There is a direct connection between flexibility and overall fitness level. Read on for some interesting facts about stretching for health.

Stretching, flexibility and fitness

Stretching is the most effective way to develop and maintain flexible muscles and joints. When joints are not regularly moved through their full range of motion, muscles and ligaments may shorten over time, resulting in decreased flexibility and strength.

Even for those who are not participating in a physical fitness program, adding stretching to your routine may improve or maintain flexibility and enable your body to continue performing daily activities with ease. It may also decrease the risk of injury.¹

Benefits of stretching

When we stretch, we help increase the length of our muscles and their associated soft tissues. This process helps reduce general muscle tension and promotes increased range of motion. Other benefits of stretching include:²

- Decreased risk of injuries
- Increased blood flow to the muscles
- Improved performance of physical activities
- Improved flexibility

Two types of stretching

There are two main types of stretching – static and dynamic. Static stretching is performed by extending the targeted muscle group to its maximal point and holding that position for 30 seconds or more. Unlike static stretching, dynamic stretching uses continuous movement patterns that mimic the exercise or sport to be performed. The purpose of dynamic stretching is to improve flexibility for a given sport or activity.⁴

Safety first:

Never stretch to the point of discomfort. Use good posture and alignment, and always check with your healthcare provider before beginning any new exercise routine.

Guidelines for safe stretching

As with other physical activities, there are guidelines to help ensure that stretching is done correctly and safely. Keep in mind that stretching may cause injury if done incorrectly. Additionally, if you are not physically fit or have any pain, stiffness, or injury, it is recommended that you speak to a health care provider before engaging in stretching activity. Discontinue any exercise that causes you pain or discomfort and consult your doctor.³

Always begin your stretching exercises with a warm-up. A warm-up should be a light activity such as walking, jogging, or easy aerobics. For most people, this will take about 5-10 minutes.^{1,3}

Here is what a good warm-up can do for you:

- Prepare the body and mind for more strenuous activity
- Increase the body's core and muscle temperatures
- Increase both your heart rate and your respiratory rate, which helps your body prepare for exercise
- Increase blood flow to deliver oxygen and nutrients to the muscles being worked

Here are some additional tips to help ensure you are stretching in a safe and effective way:

- Stretch gently, slowly, and smoothly. Stretch only to the point where you feel mild tension in the muscle you are stretching.
- Breathe normally during each stretch. Holding your breath tightens up your muscles and makes the stretch more difficult.
- And lastly, stretch each major muscle group through a full range of motion.

Proper technique

Be aware of proper technique when stretching. The type of stretching you do will depend on the exercise or activity you will be engaging in. General recommendations are to warm-up with dynamic stretching and end with static stretches, but this may be modified depending on the chosen activity.⁴

Never stretch to the point of pain. Your stretch should be gentle to start and then progress but never cause pain. Use good posture and alignment as this will help ensure you are stretching the correct muscle group and not placing strain on another.

How long and often you should stretch may vary from person to person. Many individuals achieve optimum benefits by stretching at least two to three times per week. Even 5 to 10 minutes of stretching at a time may be helpful. Regular stretching may keep your body more flexible, allowing you to move better as you age.³



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