STRETCHING Your Limits

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Experts agree that controlled stretching should be part of every fitness program

Incorporating exercise into your daily life is a healthy goal — as long as you treat your body right. Following a few important guidelines can protect your muscles from injury and keep you active.

Experts agree that every exercise program should incorporate the following: a stretch/warm-up, a cardiovascular component, resistance and a cool down. Not every aspect of the exercise program needs to be done each day. In general, cardiovascular exercise (brisk walking, running, bicycling) should be done three to five times a week to achieve the most benefit. In addition, resistance training should also be done a minimum of two to three times per week.

STRETCH

What about stretching? Is there a right amount? Do you need to stretch every session? Well, it depends.

Stretching has long been considered important in preventing injury. Surprisingly, however, there is little research to support this.

A few brief stretches prior to exercise are helpful to determine how your muscles will respond on a given day. Pain or slight twinges of discomfort may be signs to avoid activity. Stretching after an activity is important, as muscles may become shortened from a workout and need stretching to return to their normal length. Stretching is particularly effective after cardiovascular exercise. "...An optimal muscle stretch should be held for 20 to 30 seconds."

CONTROLLED VS. BALLISTIC STRETCHING

So what type of stretching exercise is best? There are two types of stretching — "controlled/gradual" stretching and "ballistic" stretching. Controlled stretching is gradual and involves creating mild tension in the muscle, then passively moving the body part to lengthen the muscle being stretched. A safe, stable starting position should be used and muscle location and function are critical variables to be considered.

Ballistic stretching is not recommended as it creates a risk for overstretching and additional injury. It involves a quick, hard stretch such as standing and quickly trying to touch the floor, or repeatedly bouncing while stretching to achieve greater stretches with each bounce.

If you are trying to stretch tight muscles as a result of injury, lack of activity or poor posture, an optimal muscle stretch should be held for 20 to 30 seconds. This duration may be difficult to tolerate if you have attempted too much stretching too quickly. Stretching should always be preceded by some type of cardiovascular warm-up activity, such as riding a stationary bike. This increases blood flow, which research has shown improves the ability for the muscle to be stretched. For muscles that have been shortened for some time, daily stretching, perhaps two to three times a day for several weeks, may be required.

ASK THE EXPERTS

The knowledge and skills of a physical therapist may be helpful in determining the right amount of stretching exercises as you get started. Your physical therapist may be able to recommend additional exercises that incorporate the use of stability balls, foam rolls, straps or other stretching tools to maximize your stretching ability. As with every exercise program, consult your physician before starting.

The correct balance of stretching tight muscles, strengthening weak muscles and an expert's eye to make sure your technique is first-rate are all critical to your overall success. So, take some time to stretch — throughout your day, prior to your workout and after you are done. It's what your body needs to keep moving.

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