

Stretching

No Pain, All Gain

We all know the benefits of stretching before undertaking a strenuous activity. But, did you know that improper or excessive stretching might actually increase the likelihood of getting injured?

Many have been conditioned to “stretch till it hurts”. We may push a stretch as far as we can go, or bounce up and down to reach even further. These methods can cause pain as well as physical damage. This is because our muscles are protected by a mechanism called the “stretch reflex”. Any time we stretch the muscle fibers too far, a nerve reflex responds by sending a signal to the muscles to contract. So, what you are doing is actually tightening the very muscles you are trying to stretch! What results are microscopic tears in the muscle fibers. This tearing leads to the formation of scar tissue in the muscles, with a gradual loss of elasticity.

The trick is to stretch correctly, regularly and in moderation. Here are some points to consider:

1. Don't stretch too far. Go to the point where you feel a mild tension and hold for 10 to 30 seconds. This is called an “Easy Stretch”. The feeling of tension should subside as you hold the position. If not, ease off slightly. Then move a little further until you again feel a mild tension and hold for another 10 to 30 seconds. This is called the “Developmental Stretch”. This is the part that increases flexibility. Do not stretch any further.
2. Remember not to bounce. Stretching should be slow and gradual. You do not have to push limits or go further each day.
3. Don't hold your breath during a stretch.
4. Stop if you feel any pain. Your body is signaling that you have gone too far.
5. Develop body awareness by focusing on the muscles you are trying to stretch without moving other body parts.
6. Stretch any time you feel like it and always before a physical activity. Cold muscles are more likely to tear than warmer ones. After exercising, stretching can help prevent muscles from tightening up.

Stretching should be part of your daily life because it relaxes your mind, tunes your body and prepares you to adjust to the stresses of physical activity. And.. when done correctly, stretching just makes you feel good!

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