

→ How Flexible Are You?

Flexibility training is perhaps the most undervalued part of any workout program in today's evolving world of fitness. While cardio respiratory and strength training have their role in your health, flexibility training is often overlooked and just as crucial to your results.

With the advancement of technology in our everyday lives, humans have become less active. The majority of jobs require less physical activity and people are moving less everyday with the increased convenience of travel, communication, entertainment etc. The end result is that people move less and often sit more. This can result in the development of postural distortions in your body and eventually, limiting your flexibility. However, as the population ages, more of us are learning to appreciate the rewards of stretching.

Research shows that flexibility training can develop and maintain range of motion in your joints, and may help prevent and treat injury. In fact, the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) added flexibility training to its general exercise recommendations, advising stretching exercises for the main muscle groups 2 to 3 days per week.

Warming up vs. Stretching

The warm up and stretching portion of a training program are not always the same thing. Warming up is an activity prior to static stretching that increases the tissue temperature and blood flow in your muscles, joints, tendons and ligaments. The goal here is to prepare the muscles for lengthening (stretching), and the joints for physical activity to help reduce the risk of injury. For example, walking on a treadmill for 5 to 10 minutes at a low to moderate, controlled pace for a warm up prior to stretching. Other techniques can be used like self myofascial release, also known as foam roll stretching, to prepare the tissues for stretching as well as correcting muscle imbalances and relieving tight spots in your muscles.

The Science of Stretching

When muscles are stretched to a point of tension, receptors within the muscles are stimulated and send messages to the brain via the spinal cord. Muscle spindles, receptors sensitive to change in length of a muscle, are your body's protective mechanism to prevent over stretching and injury. If a muscle is overstretched or stretched too fast, the spinal cord sends a reflex message to contract that muscle.

Golgi tendon organs, receptors sensitive to change in tension of a muscle, can help you get a deeper more effective stretch in the gym. When excessive tension is slowly and consistently placed on a muscle for 20 to 30 seconds, the Golgi tendon organs trigger a reaction in the muscle called autogenic inhibition, which inhibits contraction and relaxes the muscle for a deeper stretch. This makes it more important to hold each static stretch for at least 20 seconds.

Flexibility Training Tips

There are many types of stretching you can do to improve your flexibility depending on your goals and level of fitness like corrective, active-isolated and dynamic stretching. A qualified personal trainer who is knowledgeable in anatomy and kinesiology of muscle attachments and joint movements may have greater success in designing flexibility programs customized for the individual.

I recommend using flexibility training as an integral part of your actual workout, and not just one or two quick stretches which will yield limited results. The more time and attention you give to your flexibility training, the more benefits you'll experience. Are you a golfer? Do you ski, run, or play tennis? Do your daily home or work routines include bending, lifting, or sitting for long periods? Functional flexibility improves "the stability and mobility of the whole person in his or her specific environment," according to NASM. They recommend an individualized stretching program to improve both stability (the ability to maintain ideal body alignment during all activities) and mobility (the ability to use full, normal range of motion).

Listen To Your Body

Pay attention to tight areas in your body. Use 2 to 3 sets of static stretches for each tight muscle prior to a workout. Focus on the areas you are training that day and the days you trained on the previous session. Try to relax the muscle being stretched and control your breathing by inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth using your abdominals and not your upper chest muscles. Also try contracting the opposing muscle to get a deeper stretch creating reciprocal inhibition. For example, contract the quadriceps during a seated hamstring stretch. Ask your personal trainer about foam roll stretching and try to incorporate it into your warm up and cool down portion of the work out.

Be consistent with your stretching. Integrate stretching into your permanent fitness program. Check out different group exercises classes at Synergy Fitness to improve your flexibility, posture, balance and start elevating your health today!

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