The Benefits of Stretching and Flexibility

Introduction

You’ve been told the same thing since grade school: that you need to stretch before you exercise or you will hurt yourself. We were all taught the basic stretches and probably all have memories of falling over trying to pull up our leg for a hamstring stretch. These amusing and probably somewhat painful memories are important, but if you’re like most people who experienced the joy of physical education classes throughout your school career, you were probably never told why you should stretch.

Stretching is so much more than just contorting your body into random shapes and showing off those awesome calves before you run a couple of miles or dive in for a few laps in the pool. Proper stretching techniques offer a variety of physical and mental benefits that go far beyond basic exercise. Read on and find out how learning how to properly perform a few simple stretches can go a long way toward changing your outlook on life.
Chapter 1
Why should I stretch?

Like many people, whether you’re a beginning athlete or a yoga master, you know that you should stretch, and you probably know how. But why should you stretch? Just because somebody told you to?

• **Improve Your Flexibility.** Hello, Gumby! It may not be obvious at first, but you will start to notice a difference in the way you move. It won’t make you a yogi, but you may be surprised at how easily you can touch your toes after adding some serious stretching to your workout regimen.

• **Increase Circulation.** Not only does it just sound healthier, but it also has a variety of benefits, including improving the supply of nutrients to your muscles and cartilage. This has the added bonus of reducing overall muscle soreness and improving the rate of muscle growth and repair.

• **Increased Metabolism.** Stretching and exercising causes what is known as micro-tears in the muscle tissue. Don’t get too freaked out at the name though – putting a bit of strain on your joints won’t rip holes through your muscles; they’re completely normal. Your body burns up calories to repair these micro-tears – which is what makes you stronger – and the stronger your muscles are, the more calories they will burn while at rest. This can help to increase your overall metabolism.
• **Improve your Posture.** Many of us are guilty of having poor posture. This is generally a result of sitting in front of a desk or a computer, either for work or for pleasure, for extended periods of time. Modern desk chairs are designed for comfort, not for proper posture. You could always invent the long sought-after time machine and retreat back to The Time Before Chairs, but it’s probably easier to stretch. Stretching can help to strengthen your muscles and there are a number of stretches designed specifically to help improve your posture. Holding yourself correctly can have a variety of benefits on its own, such as facilitating ease of breathing and improved confidence. It’s a win-win any way you look at it.

• **Reduce Stress.** Exercise is known to be very stress relieving overall, but stretches can directly reduce the effect that stress has on your body. Stress restricts the blood flow to muscles in your back, neck and shoulders. Proper stretching techniques can help to improve the blood flow to those areas, releasing the tension and making you feel less anxious. While it won’t pay off your college debt or fix your relationships, stretching is great for helping you to at least alleviate the effects of stress for a while.

These are only a few of the benefits of proper stretching techniques. As already stated, you don’t have to do anything – you’re an adult, after all. But not stretching, or stretching incorrectly, can result in:

- decreased metabolism
- increased possibility for injury
- decreased mobility (as a result of injury or otherwise)

…and a host of other problems. In a case like this, the benefits most definitely outweigh the risks.
What is the best way for me to learn to start stretching?

Learning to stretch may seem a little intimidating – you’re supposed to be able to touch your what to your what!? The important thing to remember is that it doesn’t matter if you’re in physical therapy, on a weight loss journey, an athlete, or a yogi; stretching is beneficial to everyone. Learning to stretch properly is the best way to reap the maximum benefits from exercise while still making sure that you don’t accidentally injure yourself in the process.

One very important thing to remember, that you were probably all taught improperly in school, is not to stretch cold muscles. Don’t just get out of your chair and start stretching. I know you’re excited, but recent studies have shown that stretching cold muscles can actually lead to more injuries than not stretching at all. Make sure you do something low-impact (walking, slow jogging, or other mild aerobic exercise) to warm up before you start stretching.

1. **Consult with your doctor** before beginning any exercise plan.
2. **Start slow.** Don’t try to throw yourself right into the Crane pose if you never done so much as a Downward Facing Dog.
3. **Don’t bounce.** It may be tempting to bounce during your stretches to get a little bit more reach, but it can lead to injuries.
4. **Hold your stretch** for at least 30 seconds, then release smoothly.
5. **Don’t stretch until it hurts.** You should feel tension and perhaps a slight burning as the muscle is stretched, but it should not be painful.

If you are planning to start a particular type of exercise, such as running or swimming, look into some stretches that are targeted specifically toward those muscle groups.

And whatever regimen you start, don’t treat stretching like you did your New Year’s resolution: make sure you keep up with it! Stretching once or twice may seem like a good idea but you won’t be able to experience the full benefits unless you make sure to stretch a few times per week. Make stretching a regular part of your work out plan to make it harder to forget. Old dogs can learn new tricks. They just have to be reminded every couple of days.
Just stretching, while beneficial in its own right, is not enough. Don’t worry, though, there are plenty of little tricks and tips you can use to maximize these benefits.

First of all, drink lots of water: to find your inner Gumby, you must first find your inner fish. Scientists and health gurus will argue until they’re blue in the face about how much water you’re supposed to be drinking. Some say it’s supposed to be eight 8oz glasses per day, others say to divide your weight in half and drink that many ounces per day. The one thing that all these arguing experts agree on is that you need to drink more water!

Second, you need to eat clean. In a nutshell, this means;

- Eat a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts and legumes, and dark leafy greens.
- Eat lean meats and fish, or avoid meat all together.
- Avoid grains and dairy, or eat in moderation.
- Avoid all processed foods. If it has more than three ingredients, or the label is covered with ingredients you can’t pronounce, don’t eat it.
- Enjoy your vices, including things like alcohol and chocolate... in moderation.
Yes, you can enjoy your vices, but vices they remain – don’t overindulge. “It’s good for me” is not an accurate response to “why were you drinking so much last night?”

Third, you need to exercise regularly. While stretching will give a boost to both your physical well being and your overall mental health, it can only do so much by itself. Even if you do nothing more than walking around your neighborhood for 30 minutes a day, it’s infinitely better than doing nothing.

With obesity running rampant, your health is one of the most precious things you can have. Learning to stretch properly, as you can see, is only a part of that but it does play a major role in helping you to ensure that you can retain your health in the years to come.
Chapter 4

How does it help?

Stretching, and its benefits, can be applied to a variety of sports and other athletic events as well as to everyday life. Read on for a few examples.

Yoga

At its core, yoga is all about flexibility, balance, and improving the body by helping the participant to find his or her center. The most easily recognized yoga poses are actually nothing more than slow and controlled stretches. Participating in even basic yoga classes has been shown to improve fitness and reduce stress. It can also be beneficial in managing both mental and physical chronic conditions.

Cheerleading and Dance

Cheerleading, dance, and other similar sports require strength, flexibility, and balance – not just good looks. All three of these can be achieved through proper techniques. Stretching also encourages good posture and correct form, which can prevent injuries.

Golf

Yes, golf. Even if you get no other exercise, your golf swing can benefit from proper stretching techniques. While flexibility isn’t as important here, properly stretching before you start your game can improve your swing by increasing your overall range of motion. You’ll feel the difference every time you yell “FORE!”
Running, Cycling, and Swimming

These three may seem like they shouldn’t be in the same category unless you’re running a triathlon. They all use different muscle groups, have varying levels of impact, and require assorted amounts of effort. Where they become similar is that they are all high intensity sports that require a potentially enormous amount of recovery time. Just ask anyone who has run a marathon or swum the English Chanel how long it took them to bounce back. Learning how to properly stretch can improve recovery time, which will allow you to train harder and longer than you would have been able to otherwise.

Physical Therapy

People attend physical therapy for a variety of reasons. Accidents, injuries, illnesses, and surgeries can impair how well a person can walk, run, or move. Stretching exercises can be extremely beneficial to patients undergoing physical therapy, since these exercises can slowly strengthen the muscles without having to put a great amount of stress on the body. If done properly and consistently, this can lead to a fantastic overall improvement.

It is almost impossible to list all the potential applications and benefits of stretching and flexibility, simply because there are so many.

Not to mention: Gymnastics, Soccer, Volleyball, Squash, Hockey, Baseball, Tennis, Rugby, Netball, Horse Riding, Skiing, Karate, Judo, Kickboxing, Tai Chi, Aerobics, Hiking, Mountaineering, Rock Climbing, Extreme Sports..

Basically any sport or activity that requires flexibility, range of motion, ease of movement and technical ability, the list is endless!
Chapter 5

Best Type of Stretching for Flexibility

Endless hours of research have gone into the subject of Stretching and now we finally have something to sink our teeth into. It is now broadly realized and scientifically proven that PNF Stretching is the fastest and most effective way known to increase your flexibility! At last someone has found the secret technique that will help us get fit and flexible, and stay that way. No more of these “ballistic” techniques that have you bouncing as you stretch causing unnecessary injury.

While stretching is a fantastic way to supplement your exercise regime, there’s no point at all if you’re not doing it correctly. Improper stretching can damage muscles, tendons, and ligaments.

Isometric PNF Stretching (Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation)

This is a stretching technique which combines passive and isometric stretching for maximum static flexibility. Basically, the theory is that when you stretch your muscle to its full potential and then contract the muscle, a further stretch occurs allowing you to go beyond your initial maximum length of stretch. So when your muscle is passively stretched, then contracts strongly against resistance while in the stretched position, and then is passively stretched again, this allows for a deeper stretch resulting in increased range of motion and therefore increased flexibility.

Advocates of PNF Stretching say to achieve maximum flexibility benefits of this technique you must use a partner to provide resistance against your muscle contraction and help you move deeper into your stretch. However, it is not always convenient to rely on a partner to be there when you need to stretch and they will never be able to feel exactly what you feel, you must listen to your own body and tell yourself when you should stop.

There are some fantastic stretching aids such as the Limber Stretch Strap, which is like having a portable stretching partner! It can help you get into the stretched position you desire and hold you there so you can activate your muscle contractions and have complete control of the intensity of your own stretch. The Limber Stretch Strap provides you with leverage so you can: stretch, contract targeted muscle groups, then relax those muscles again and move into a deeper stretch. Visit: limberstretch.com to learn more.
Afterward

It’s All About You

When it comes right down to it, learning proper stretching and flexibility techniques is all for you. Whether you want to look great in that itsy bitsy teeny weenie yellow polkadot bikini when the weather warms up or you’re just in need of a change, it should all be for you.

All you need to do is take the first step. Promise yourself that you are going to do whatever it takes to effect this change, then make that first leap into your new lease on life.

Limber Stretch Community

Thanks for reading our book on The Benefits of Stretching and Flexibility, we hoped you’ve learned lots! If you’d like to start your Limber journey today then come and join the Limber Stretch Community. We are always sharing Stretching Techniques, Flexibility Inspiration, Sports News and lots more fun things. Together our community shares in each others progression, determination and achievements. We’re all here to cheer each other on so join us and be part of the team:

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