

# A Stretch Goes a Long Way

*By Chelsea Cooper, MPA, CPT – Edited and printed with permission by S. Russ, LMT, NCBTMB*

As we age (and we do this every single day) our muscles tighten and the range of motion in our joints decreases. This can impact even the most active lifestyle and hinder normal day-to-day activities. Tasks that used to be simple, like zipping up a dress or reaching for a can off the top shelf, may become extremely difficult. A regular stretching routine may be helpful in lengthening your muscles and making daily activities easier again.

The word flexible comes from the Latin word *flexus*, which means "to bend." Flexibility is the degree to which an individual muscle will lengthen. Stretching increases flexibility, which will help you perform daily activities and reduce the risk of muscle, joint and tendon injuries. Stretching also improves circulation, increasing blood flow to these areas. Increased blood flow provides nourishment to the muscles and helps to rid the body of waste by-products. Improved circulation can also help speed up recovery time if you suffer an injury. Increased blood flow also means more oxygen is delivered to your cells. Lack of oxygen has been found to be a cause of pain and tissue dysfunction.

What's more, stretching can help eliminate or decrease low back pain, one of the most common kinds of structural pain, affecting a large percentage of the population. Muscle tightness in the quadriceps, hamstrings, hip flexors, gluts and low back is a common cause or contributor to low back pain. Properly stretching these muscles will often reduce or eliminate the pain. Keep in mind that every joint is tied to another joint, so if one muscle is tight, it is going to affect another joint or muscle.

One of the greatest benefits of stretching is that you're able to increase your range of motion, which means your joints can move further; more range of motion translates to less injuries. Stretching after you exercise (at least after you've warmed up a bit) has proven to be much more effective than pre-workout stretches, because by the time you've completed your workout, the muscles are "warm." Post-exercise stretching also helps reduce soreness, improves workout recovery, and ensures muscle and tendons are working properly.

There are no disadvantages to stretching - unless, of course, you do them improperly, which is actually easy to do if you don't know what you're doing. Here are a few tips to keep in mind before starting any stretching program:

DON'T bounce when stretching; hold your position for the specified time (usually 3-7 seconds). Do repetitions just like you would with exercise. Holding a stretch too long can actually make it tighten up; the opposite of what you intend.

DON'T stretch cold muscles; always do some type of warm-up for at least five minutes: jogging in place, walking on a treadmill, light jump rope, etc. Stretching cold muscles can lead to injury so always warm up slowly.

DON'T overstretch. There might be a little discomfort, especially if you're not used to stretching, but it should not be painful. More is not better; trying to stretch too far is not better. Again, the rule of thumb is 3-7 seconds and repetitions.

DON'T stretch a muscle improperly. If you are not sure of the proper stretch or how to perform it, get some assistance from a professional.

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