Fit Facts™

FLEXIBLE BENEFITS

Most people take part in aerobic activity to improve their cardiovascular endurance and burn fat. People weight-train to maintain lean muscle tissue and build strength. Those are the two most important elements of a fitness program, right?

Actually, there are three important elements. Regrettably, flexibility training is often neglected. Flexibility training:

- Allows greater freedom of movement and improved posture
- Increases physical and mental relaxation
- Releases muscle tension and soreness
- Reduces the risk of injury

Some people are naturally more flexible. Flexibility is primarily due to one's genetics, gender, age, body shape and level of physical activity. As people grow older, they tend to lose flexibility, usually as a result of inactivity, but partially because of the aging process itself. The less active you are, the less flexible you are likely to be. As with cardiovascular endurance and muscle strength, flexibility will improve with regular training.

Stretch for Success

Before stretching, take a few minutes to warm up, as stretching cold muscles may increase your chances for injury. Begin with a simple, low-intensity warm-up, such as easy walking while swinging the arms in a wide circle. Spend at least five to 10 minutes warming up prior to stretching. The general recommendation for people starting an exercise program is to perform gentle dynamic-type stretches before a workout and static stretches after exercise.

When performing a static stretch:

- Take a deep breath and slowly exhale as you gently stretch the muscle to a point of tension
- Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds, relax and then repeat the stretch two to four more times
- Dynamic stretches are more advanced and should be instructed by a qualified professional

Avoid these stretching mistakes:

- Don't bounce a stretch. Holding a stretch is more effective and there is less risk of injury.
- Don't stretch a muscle that is not warmed up.
- Don't strain or push a muscle too far. If a stretch hurts, ease up.
- Don't hold your breath during the stretch. Continue to breathe normally.

Fitting Stretching Into a Compressed Schedule

Time constraints keep many people from stretching. Some complain they just don't have time to stretch; others hurry out of their fitness classes before the cool-down exercises are completed.

Ideally, at least 30 minutes, three times per week, should be spent on flexibility training. But even a mere five minutes of stretching at the end of an exercise session is better than nothing to reduce potential muscle soreness. And all aerobic activity should be followed by at least a few minutes of stretching.

Here are some tips for fitting stretching into an overbooked schedule:

- If you don't have time to sufficiently warm up before stretching, try doing a few stretches immediately after a shower or while soaking in a hot tub. The hot water elevates body and muscle temperature enough to make them more receptive to stretching.
- Try a few simple stretches before getting out of bed in the morning. Wake yourself up with a few full-body stretches by gently pointing the toes and reaching your arms above your head. This can clear your mind and help jump-start your morning.
- Take a stretching class such as yoga or tai chi. Scheduling a class will help you to stick with a regular stretching program.

Additional Resource

Thacker, S.B. et al. (2004). The impact of stretching on sports injury risk: A systematic review of the literature. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise,* 36, 3, 371–378.

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at www.acefitness.org and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts℠