

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRETCHING

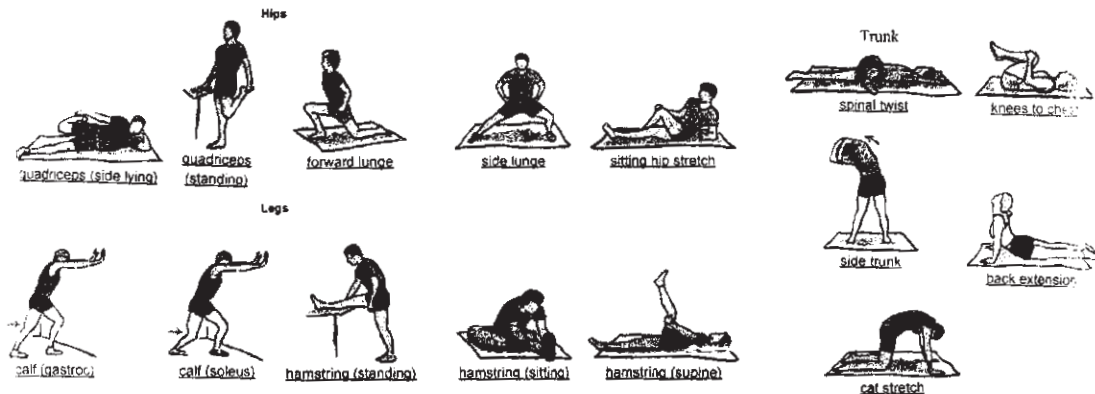
One of the biggest mistakes some athletes make, especially those who play "seasonal" sports, is not stretching properly or enough before and after the activity. Flexibility training is perhaps the most undervalued component of conditioning and preparing to participate in an activity or sport. It, also, plays an important role in injury prevention, which could include muscle or tendon tears, joint sprains and overuse syndromes, such as tendonitis or bursitis.

Muscles work optimally at their maximal strength and length. Daily activities and a lack of movement can cause muscles to shorten over time, resulting in a decrease in their flexibility and muscle function and, thereby, allowing them to become more susceptible to injury. Stretches assist in warming up the muscles, joints and fascia of the body and, therefore, help prepare it for any type of activity or sport. Stretches can, also, help manage any muscle imbalances that can occur as a result of one's daily activities or lack of it. By increasing the flexibility of a muscle, stretches can help increase blood circulation in the muscles, relaxation in the muscles and one's psychological preparation to perform an activity or sport. Stretching after an activity or sport helps remove lactic acid from the muscles, which in turn, reduces muscle soreness.

Flexibility, in general terms, has been defined as the range of motion about a joint and its surrounding muscles during a passive movement. By increasing the range of motion of a joint, performance may be enhanced and the risk of injury reduced. The rationale for this is that the more flexible one is, the associated limb will be able to move further before an injury occurs. For example, tight muscles may restrict how far you can extend your leg while running and place an increased strain on the hamstrings, quadriceps and gastrocnemius muscles and tendons and, therefore, lead to a possible tear. Thus, flexibility allows enhanced movement with greater ease and dexterity.

As a general rule, dynamic stretches are better used as part of a warm-up before an activity or sport because they work in a more functional way. Static stretches or PNF flexibility training is best used after an activity when the body is warm for increasing range of motion because they place the muscle in its most lengthened position. A good balance between dynamic and static stretching is, therefore, recommended to gain maximum benefits.

Here are some key notes about stretching that one should bear in mind: 1) you want to take the muscle to the point where resistance is felt, but no pain should ever be felt - over-stretching can actually damage a muscle 2) the feeling of tightness should diminish as you hold the stretch, 3) avoid holding your breath, 4) hold each stretch x 10-30 seconds each and repeat them about 3-5 times.



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