

## Secrets of Stretching

Go to any sporting event # whether it is a football game, soccer match, track meet, hockey or baseball game, and you will see the athletes warming up and doing stretching exercises. Stretching is more than a way to limber up for a big game; it's essential to optimal performance and safety.

Even if your fitness level is limited to a workout at the local gym three days a week, or a morning jog around the block, you need to perform stretching exercises every bit as much as the pro athletes do. Want to stretch your workout to its maximum capacity? Here's a few things that should not be kept secret:

### No Pain

Stretching increases your flexibility and, ultimately, helps you to avoid injuries. Most people know that they should stretch before working out to prevent injuries during the exercises, but a few realize that stretching after a workout, when muscles are still warm, can increase flexibility. Take a good stretch before and after every workout.

### Ease Into It

Don't tackle the toughest stretches first. Work slowly, and progress incrementally, until you've achieved the most difficult exercises.

### Be Flexible

While stretching, increase your flexibility by holding your position for sixty seconds or more. While holding your position for twenty seconds is sufficient for warm ups, holding each position for at least 60 seconds will help to develop your body's flexibility.

### Ban the Bounce

Be careful not to "bounce" your stretches. In other words, avoid going into stretching position then immediately returning to the relaxed position repeatedly. Get into stretching position, hold it for several seconds, and then slowly relax. You may safely repeat stretching exercise when they are done in this manner. Bouncing or forcing yourself into a position during stretching exercises can create strain or damage in certain joints or muscles.

### Stay Connected

Warm up all of your muscle groups. Remember, every muscle in your body is connected, and most of them will be used while you are exercising. For example, many people tend to neglect their neck while performing their stretching exercises. The neck muscles are vitally important and the exercises are very easy to do. It's as simple as placing the palm of your hand against your forehead, and gently pushing. The same should be done at the sides and back of the head.

### Do It For You

Remember to follow your own personal requirements, and not someone else's. Know and respect your limits and your capabilities. Don't force yourself to do certain exercises just because you see others doing it. Listen to your body. Start slow and increase your limits, as you are able. There will be days when your body is just too tired, and you may have to consider reducing your range of motion.

### Sit A Bit

Don't be afraid to take a break. When you rest between sets and stations, you are allowing your body enough time to recover some of its spent energy. It's also advisable to avoid working the same muscle groups consecutively for two days. Muscles grow in periods of rest.

### Have A Heart

Stretching exercises and rigorous workouts are great for your body, but don't forget your heart. Aerobic exercises are those physical activities that require much oxygen for fuel, and they are great for strengthening your heart. This includes cardiovascular exercises such as running, biking, swimming and skipping rope.

### Move To The Music

Stretching and exercising is not always a great deal of fun, but music can certainly make it a lot more enjoyable. Pick up an mp3 or CD player, or have a radio in the room to increase your intensity or keep you occupied over long periods of training. If you're working out in a group setting, be sure to have good headphones and avoid disturbing those around you.

### A Stretch A Day

Make it part of your every day routine. Stretch regularly to continually increase your levels of strength and flexibility, and your range of movements. Even if you don't exercise every day, a routine of daily stretching can feel great!

Stretching exercises should be considered necessary pieces of safety equipment. It just wouldn't be safe to play hockey without a helmet or soccer without shin pads, so don't even think about working out without stretching first. Stretching

prevents injuries, increases your potential, and it just feels great all over.