

STRETCH YOUR WAY TO BETTER HEALTH

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Flexibility training is by far the most undervalued and underemphasized component of physical fitness. Flexibility training can benefit individuals of all ages and backgrounds. Stretching is the most familiar form of this type of exercise but it can also include activities such as Tai Chi, Pilates, and Yoga. Learn more about the importance of flexibility training, and how it can be easily incorporated into a simple daily routine to benefit you.



Flexibility can best be defined as the range of motion available in a joint, such as the hip, or a series of joints such as the spine. There are many factors that can affect flexibility such as age, gender, body type, level of physical activity, elasticity within muscles, and the integrity of joint structures themselves. The benefits of flexibility training include greater freedom of movement, increased balance and coordination, increased physical efficiency and performance, increased relaxation and stress reduction, decreased risk of injury, and decreased recovery time from injury or strenuous bouts of exercise or work. Flexibility is one of the simplest elements of physical fitness to improve. It takes little effort and no specialized equipment. We will take a look at some specific examples of how flexibility can be beneficial.

It is important to note that all individuals can benefit from flexibility training. This can include individuals participating in sports and recreation, people in the workforce, and even grandparents playing with grandchildren! Flexibility is a component of physical fitness that trains our bodies to withstand physical stresses and demands more effectively. Good flexibility allows the joints to improve their range of motion. For example, individuals with arthritic conditions can find this type of exercise extremely beneficial in coping with stiff and painful joints. Those in athletic activities or with occupational demands may find that an increased range of motion around a joint allows them to perform required tasks repetitively and efficiently. A flexible body is able to accommodate desired joint angles without undue stress on the tissues around them because it has been trained to do so. Flexibility training is therefore essential for injury prevention. It can also be used in a rehabilitation setting following injury. It is generally accepted that a muscle tear or pull will heal with scar tissue. Scar tissue is not the same as the original tissue it is replacing, and is usually more resistant to stretch than normal, healthy tissue. Stretching should be used at the appropriate time during the healing process to assist in lengthening tight scar tissue. Good flexibility also improves posture and ergonomics by keeping muscles susceptible to tightness in good working order. This allows for proper alignment and posture to occur, and minimizes the chances of negative adaptation, and secondary changes in movement patterns that can lead to pain and dysfunction.



As mentioned previously, stretching is the most common and familiar form of flexibility training, but can also encompass other activities that incorporate body movements through full ranges of motion. There have been many scientific advancements in the field of flexibility training, but for the purpose of this article, we will mainly focus on static stretching because it remains the simplest, safest, and easiest

form of flexibility training to engage in. When stretching, the primary influence is on the soft connective tissues of the body such as muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joint capsules. Secondary influences occur at the affected joint or joints and on the nervous system. When it comes to flexibility training and stretching, picture these soft tissues as elastic bands. When they are healthy and flexible, they are able to expand and relax with relative ease. Due to age, injury, or inactivity, these elastic bands will lose their stretch and spring-like activity.

Stretching exercises should ideally be performed when your body is warm. A warm-up consisting of low-impact aerobic exercise or activity for 5 to 10 minutes will achieve this by raising body temperature. This increase in body temperature makes the soft tissue in the body more pliable and able to tolerate stretching. A good flexibility-training program will involve a complete range of stretching exercises for different muscle groups in the body. Each stretch should be eased into, taken to the point of feeling a good “pull” and not painful. The stretch should be held for a minimum of 15 to 20 seconds, with each muscle group stretched 2 to 3 times in succession and on both sides of the body where applicable. It is important to maintain normal breathing during stretching and to stop if you feel any pain whatsoever. For best results, daily flexibility training is ideal, but modest gains can be realized in as little as three sessions per week. Stretching performed as part of a preventative daily routine can be extremely beneficial, but is also important before physical activity to help your body prepare for activity, and after physical activity to help relieve muscle and joint soreness.

Many experts believe that flexibility conditioning has an important role in maintaining healthy joints. Flexibility training will benefit individuals of all ages and backgrounds. It is inexpensive, safe, and simple to perform. So find a comfortable spot today and stretch your way to better structural health...the sky is the limit!

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