



Stretch it out



Stretching should be an integral part of any sports activity, yet many of us - especially when pressed for time – decide to give it a miss and head straight for the shower instead.

So just why should we stretch and how will it help in the quest for fitness? Chinnor-based personal fitness trainer, Hilary Westall, talks us through the long and short of it.

Why stretch?

If done correctly, stretching can provide many benefits to the body and mind, including:

- Improved range of movement
- Reduced pain and soreness after exercise
- Decreased muscle tension
- Mental preparation for sport / activity
- Improved posture
- Improved circulation
- Improved muscular strength
- Restored strength and flexibility following injury
- Enhanced wellbeing and stress relief

Types of stretch:

Dynamic: Dynamic stretches prepare the muscle tissue for active muscle contraction and relaxation as required in a sporting situation. They are dynamic (moving) in nature, specific to the activity, and of short duration. Long term improvements in flexibility are limited due the short duration of the stretch.

Static: Static stretches are stretches that are held for a given period, isolating the target muscle. They can take the form of progressive stretches, where the stretch is increased gradually, but never to the point of pain, which can help improve flexibility over time.

PNF stretches: Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation is a more advanced form of flexibility that involves both the stretching and contraction of the muscle group to be targeted, a full explanation of which is beyond the scope of this article. However, it was originally developed as a form of rehabilitation and is a highly effective way of increasing flexibility and improving muscular strength. PNF stretches do require a partner, who should be a qualified trainer so that the stretch is performed safely, as there is a risk of soft tissue injury if done

incorrectly. A trainer can also talk you through what is involved and how PNF works.

When to stretch

•Warming up:

When you exercise, blood is diverted to the muscles, which increases their elasticity. If you go straight into a workout without sufficient warm-up, your cold muscles are more likely to pull or tear. Performing some dynamic stretching during the warm-up phase helps to raise body temperature and fully prepare the muscles and joints for the session ahead.

•Cooling down:

Lighter, slower movements should be performed towards the end of the workout to stop blood from 'pooling' in the extremities, followed by stretching to prevent muscle soreness and to assist in diverting blood and oxygen back to the heart. This process gradually brings the body back to normal and helps with psychological wind-down and mental relaxation – the bit where you get that self-satisfied 'I've done it!' feeling! It also helps prevent waste products, such as lactic acid, from building up in your muscles.

Effective stretching in the warm up and cool down can help prevent or reduce Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS), the heavy stiffness sometimes experienced in the day or two following a strenuous workout. DOMS is the result of torn muscle fibres, which sounds worse than it is – muscles have to break down in order to re-build during rest, and is how muscles become stronger over time.

Increasing your flexibility

Without dedicating time to your flexibility, muscles can become permanently short and tight, which reduces range of movement and increases the risk of injury. Only a long term stretching programme can improve overall flexibility, which is why it's important to include some stretching on days off as well as training days.

Physical therapists and doctors use stretching to help many people recover from all kinds of injury to realign and rehabilitate muscles, tendons and ligaments, but prevention is always better than cure!

Yoga is popular because it is based on lengthening, stretching and increasing range of movement in all the muscles, as well as the psychological benefits of relaxation and wellbeing that it gives.

Stretching technique

Good technique when stretching is very important to achieve results and to minimise the risk of injury. If in doubt, ask a qualified fitness trainer to show you how to stretch properly and find some key stretches that work for you.

- Stretch the muscles on both sides of the body evenly
- Never bounce or jerk while stretching – stretches should be smooth and slow
- Avoid over-stretching – never stretch to a point of pain. You should feel a slight tension or pull and only increase the stretch when this tension has eased
- Breathe through stretches, exhaling when you apply or increase the stretch
- Stretches should be held for a minimum of 15 seconds, and longer for more progressive stretching

Regardless of whether you are a top athlete or are just trying to stay fit and healthy, regular stretching is a crucial part of your wellbeing and long term fitness, and should always form part of your fitness routine.

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She is starting a new class, 'Core Strength & Stretch', on 17th September in the Reading Room, Chinnor High Street, every Friday 9.30-10.30am.

Contact her for further details.



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