Stretching is often the neglected part of the fitness equation. Many of us already struggle to fit in our cardiovascular and strength workouts. We sometimes don’t think about our flexibility until we injure ourselves, experience muscle soreness or when we can’t do an activity that we would like to do.

As we age, our muscles tighten and range of motion in the joints can be reduced. This may put a damper on active lifestyles, increase your risk of injury, and even hinder day-to-day, normal motions. Tasks that used to be simple, such as zipping up a dress or reaching for a box on the top shelf, can become difficult or even painful. A regular stretching program can help lengthen your muscles and make daily living activities easier.

Why Should I Improve My Flexibility?
You can gain big benefits from stretching on a regular basis:

• Reduce the overall feeling of stiffness in your body
• Allow greater freedom of movement
• Reduce your risk of injury
• Improve your posture
• Reduce muscle tension and soreness
• Increase the range of motion of your joints to allow you to perform everyday activities with ease (like getting in and out of bed, lifting packages or bending to tie your shoes)
• Improve your balance and coordination
• Support your ability to stay active
• Provide stress relief
• Improve athletic performance

How Often Should I Stretch?
The American College of Sports Medicine recommends stretching and flexibility activities be performed at least two to three days per week with daily being most effective.

How Long Should I Hold Each Stretch?
Hold each stretch for 10 to 30 seconds (older persons may receive greater improvements holding each stretch for 30 to 60 seconds). Repeat each stretch two to four times, accumulating 60 seconds per stretch.

Tips to Stretch Safely and Effectively
• Always warm up before stretching. This can be accomplished by performing general cardio activity such as walking, jogging or biking at a low to moderate intensity for five to ten minutes. Stretching your muscles before they are warmed up may result in injury.
• Stretch each major muscle group in the body (legs, back, chest, arms, neck and shoulders).
• Start each stretch slowly, and stretch to the point of feeling tightness or slight discomfort, not pain.
• Avoid holding your breath while you stretch. Relax and breathe freely.
• Avoid locking your joints when you straighten them during stretches. Always have a small amount of bend in your joints (elbows, knees) while stretching.

Stretching exercises may reduce power and strength. If you are participating in sports or exercise where strength and power are important for performance it is recommended that you stretch after the activity.
Focus on Flexibility

How Can I Fit Stretching into My Busy Schedule?
Check off at least two ideas that you could try this week:

☐ Stretch immediately after a shower or while soaking in a hot tub. The hot water elevates muscle temperature enough to make them more pliable and receptive to stretching.

☐ When you are short on time, stretch the muscle groups that were used most during your workout. For example:
  - After a walk or run, make it a habit to stretch your calves, hamstrings and quadriceps.
  - After an upper body weight workout, always stretch your shoulders, chest, triceps and upper back.

☐ When using the stairs, pause for a moment, hold onto the railing or wall and place the balls of your feet on the edge of a stair. Slowly drop your heels down and hold for 10–30 seconds for a great calf stretch.

☐ At your desk you can perform simple shoulder rolls, neck stretches, chest stretches and more (see stretching examples on the following pages).

☐ Do double-duty. If you are exercising on a stationary cycle, use the time to perform a few, simple upper body stretches.

Safety First
If you haven’t been physically active be sure to start slowly. Don’t do vigorous exercise at first. If you have any of the following conditions, please talk with your physician before increasing physical activity:

- diabetes
- any disease of the heart or lungs
- high blood pressure
- any history of chest pain
- breathing problems or shortness of breath
- dizziness
- swelling in your ankles
- bone or joint problems
- unusual fatigue
- pregnancy

Stay in touch with your doctor about your exercise program and your health. Do not engage in exercise activities if you have a health condition that is unstable or serious, you have new symptoms, or your doctor recommends against it.

Beginning Stretching Exercises

Hamstrings (muscles in back of thigh)

A. Sit sideways on bench. Keep one leg stretched out on bench, straight, and the other leg off of bench, with foot flat on floor. Keep back straight.

B. Lean forward from hips (not waist) until you feel stretching in leg on bench, keep back and shoulders straight. Omit this step if you have had a hip replacement, unless surgeon/therapist approves.

Hold position for 10 to 30 seconds. Reverse positions and repeat with other leg. Complete this stretch two to four times on each side.
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**Alternative Hamstring Stretch (muscles in back of thigh)**

**A.** Stand several feet behind a chair, with your legs straight, holding the back of the chair with both hands.

**B.** Bend forward from your hips (not your waist), keeping your entire back and shoulders straight (not rounded), until your upper body is parallel to the floor.

Hold position for 10 to 30 seconds. You should feel a stretch in the backs of your thighs. Repeat two to four times.

**Calves (lower leg muscles)**

**A.** Stand with hands against wall, arms straight.

**B.** Step back one to two feet with one leg, heel and foot flat on floor; leg straight. Hold position 10 to 30 seconds. Now bend knee of stepped-back leg, keeping heel and foot flat on floor.

Hold position another 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat both positions with other leg. Repeat two to four times each side.

**Triceps (muscles in back of upper arm)**

**A.** Hold a towel in right hand. Raise and bend right arm to drape towel down back.

**B.** Reach behind your back with your left hand and grasp bottom end of towel. Climb left hand progressively higher up towel, which also pulls your right arm down. Climb up as high as you can.

Reverse positions.

**Wrist**

**A.** Place hands together, in praying position.

**B.** Slowly raise elbows so arms are parallel to ground, keeping hands flat against each other.

Hold position 10 to 30 seconds. Repeat two to four times.
Focus on Flexibility

**Neck Side Bends**

A. Start with head in a comfortable, aligned position.

B. Slowly tilt head to the left to stretch the muscles on the side of the neck.

Return to starting position and then stretch to the other side. Hold each side for 10 to 30 seconds and then repeat two to four times.

**Quads (muscles in front of thighs)**

A. Lie on side and rest head on pillow or hand. Bend knee that is on top.

B. Grab front of ankle of that leg. If you can’t reach your ankle with your hand, loop a belt over your right foot. Gently pull that leg until you feel a stretch in the front of thigh.

Hold position 10 to 30 seconds. Reverse position and repeat. Complete this stretch two to four times on each side.

**Double Hip Rotation (outer muscles of hips and thighs)**

*Note: don’t do this exercise if you have had a hip replacement, unless your surgeon approves.*

A. Lie on your back on floor, knees bent. Keep shoulders on floor at all times.

B. Keeping knees together, slowly lower legs to one side. Hold position 10 to 30 seconds.

Return legs to upright position. Repeat toward other side. Complete this stretch two to four times on each side.

**Shoulder Retraction**

A. Place arms out to the side with elbows bent to 90 degrees.

B. Squeeze the shoulder blades together and push elbows toward back pockets. Feel a stretch across the chest.

Hold for 10 to 30 seconds. Return arms to starting position. Repeat this stretch two to four times.
Focus on Flexibility

Body Rotation
A. Sit with the left leg over the right.
B. Rest elbow or forearm of the right arm on the outside of the upper thigh of the left leg. Apply controlled steady pressure looking over your left shoulder.

Hold for 10 to 30 seconds and then switch to other side. Repeat two to four times on each side.

Back Extension
A. Standing with knees slightly bent, place your palms on lower back just above your hips, fingers pointing downward.
B. Gently lean back to create an extension in the lower back.

Repeat this movement slowly several times.

By doing stretching exercises at least two to three days per week, you’ll start gaining the benefits of more flexible and fluid muscles and joints!

Sources: American College of Sports Medicine
This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your doctor for advice about changes that may affect your health.