

Ask The Trainer

QUESTION:

"I have become a senior citizen and it has really dawned on me recently that I am not as flexible as I would like to be. Any suggestions?" – A.C.

RESPONSE:

Welcome to the "senior citizen club."

Flexibility is an extremely important fitness component. Millions of people, as they age, lose the ability to bend, reach, and stretch because they are simply not flexible enough to perform these procedures. Flexibility (stretching) exercises are designed to prevent, or remedy, the inflexibility caused by our inactive lifestyles. And so, while it is important to incorporate **cardio and resistance training**, the area of **flexibility training** must not be overlooked or neglected. Flexibility exercises should supplement one's cardio and resistance activity.

Here are a few guidelines that I impress on clients.

- Flexibility exercises should be done at a pace and repetition level that suits each individual. If you have not been stretching regularly, it will take a while before you can stretch some of those tight muscles fully, **SO DON'T HURRY**. Proceed at a pace that's comfortable yet will gradually accomplish what you want – more flexibility.
- Stretch to the point of mild tension and relax as you hold the stretch. Never stretch to the point of pain.
- Never bounce or use jerky motions. Stretching should be smooth and controlled.
- Hold stretches for a minimum of 10 seconds. (For some exercises you may want to hold for 15 – 20 seconds).

There are many stretching exercises and you can find charts at various websites and in books. Below are 5 basic stretches that will get you started and help anchor you on a sure foundation relative to flexibility training. Remember to keep movements slow and do not jerk. Also, allow your mind to fully enter into what you are doing and then you will be gaining an even greater stretch.

Shoulder Stretch

Purpose: To stretch muscles in the back and shoulder region.

Procedure:

1. Stand or sit with your right arm extended across your body, pointing to the left.
2. Turn head and look right.
3. With left hand just above right elbow at the tricep area, gently pull your right arm further across your body and into your chest area.
4. Do not rotate trunk in direction of stretch.
5. Repeat with left arm. Hold for 10 or more seconds.

Side Stretch

Purpose: To stretch side of upper body.

Procedure:

1. Stand with feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, and toes pointing straight ahead.
2. Place right hand on right thigh or hip for support.
3. Lift left arm up in line with your left ear and reach over your head as high as possible. Hold for 10 or more seconds.
4. Return arm to side and repeat, lifting right arm.

Lower Back and Hip Stretch

Purpose: To stretch lower back, gluteus, and hamstrings.

Procedure:

1. Lie on back while pressing lower back to floor with legs extended, knees slightly bent.
2. Bend left knee, grasp just below your knee in a hugging motion, and pull towards chest, while keeping head on floor. (A variation is to grasp the thigh under the knee).
3. Keep other knee slightly bent.
4. Hold for a count of 5, then curl shoulders and bring chin to knee. Hold for 5 counts.
5. Lower shoulders back to floor and repeat with other leg.

Groin Stretch

Purpose: To stretch groin and inner thigh areas.

Procedure:

1. Sit with soles of feet together, knees out.
2. Hold toes (or ankles) and bend from hips as if to bring chest to feet, keeping back straight.
3. Concentrate on relaxing the groin muscles. Don't fight the stretch.
4. Use elbows to gently press thighs down.
5. Hold for 10 seconds or more, then relax.

Quad Stretch

Purpose: To stretch front thigh.

Procedure:

1. Stand on left leg, holding onto wall, door, or other support with left hand.

2. Bend right knee and grasp right ankle with right hand, knee pointing down.
3. Keep back straight and stand tall. Try to point knee straight down.
4. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds. Then stretch other leg.

(This exercise can also be done lying on your side)

When some think of stretching they think of movements that are done before or after a conditioning workout. However, since sitting, standing, and other sedentary everyday activities tend to tighten up the muscles of the body, it is important to stretch not only when you work out but also **throughout** the day. Stretch whenever you get a chance. It is my personal practice to perform some stretching movements before getting out of bed each morning. I have found it to be a great way to start the day – stretching the mind, spirit, **and** body.

Once you become familiar with the muscles that need stretching, you can easily do some of these movements as you stand or sit – any time during the day. Such a lifestyle practice may not only help you avoid tight muscles; the practice may even refresh you.

Have you ever wondered why cats have nine lives? Maybe one of the reasons is that they stretch a lot. Are you smiling? (Smiling is a wonderful stretching exercise).

Success to you,

Dan